Caste, Culture and Hegemony

Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay

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SAGE Publications
New Delhi ❋ Thousand Oaks ❋ London

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First published in 2004 by

Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave, Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017

Sage Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

Sage Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

Published by Tejeshwar Singh for Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, typeset in 9.5/11.5 Century 751 BT at Excellent Laser Typesetters, Delhi and printed at Chaman Enterprises, New Delhi.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar.
Caste, culture and hegemony: social domination in colonial Bengal / Sekhar Bandyopadhyay.
p. cm.
Includes index.
1. Caste—India—Bengal. 2. Bengal (India)—Social conditions. I. Title

DS422.C3B3428 305.5'122'09541409034—dc22 2004 2003028044

ISBN: 0–7619–9849–7 (US–Hb) 81–7829–316–1 (India-Hb)

Sage Production Team: Larissa Sayers, Mathew P. J. and Santosh Rawat

Once more
for my parents
Pratima and Nani Gopal Bandyopadhyay

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Acknowledgements

This book has taken shape over a long period and along the way I have incurred many debts. Some of the chapters were previously published as independent articles or were presented as seminar papers and have been commented on by many of my former teachers, colleagues and friends. I am particularly thankful to Barun De, Sumit Sarkar, Rajat Ray, Bharati Ray, Mushirul Hasan, Nariaki Nakazato, Brian Hatcher, Bo Sax and Parimal Ghosh, who read various earlier versions of these essays and gave their comments. With Soumyen Mukherjee, Peter Robb, Peter Reeves, Asim Roy, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Bhaskar Chakrabarty, Abhijit Dasgupta and Swaraj Basu I have discussed various aspects of my argument and have benefitted from their comments and have always received generous encouragement. I am particularly indebted to Gautam Bhadra, who not only advised and critiqued, but also drew my attention to a wide variety of sources, which have been used in this work. I must also thank Ramakanta Chakravarti and Sudhir Chakrabarti whose researches I have extensively used. I am thankful to the participants of the numerous seminars and conferences in India, Australia, New Zealand, UK, Japan and Singapore, who have made comments, raised questions and made me rethink many of my assumptions and conclusions. My colleagues in History at the Victoria University of Wellington by providing me with a collegial and intellectually stimulating environment made the arduous task of writing a gratifying experience.

I should also thank here the staff of the various libraries and archives where I have worked, and these include Calcutta University Library, National Library and the West Bengal State Archives in Calcutta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and the National Archives in New Delhi, The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Library and the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library in London and the Victoria University of Wellington

Library in New Zealand. Thanks are also due to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Victoria University of Wellington for generously sponsoring this work with research leave and funding. I am also thankful to the Oxford University Press, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, the editorial committee of *Prachya* and the Secretary of the Indian History Congress for permitting me to use previously published materials. I am grateful to Debjani Dutta of Sage for her sustained interest in publishing this book.

My family has always been helpful and supportive and there is no point in thanking them publicly here. My parents have always been full of encouragement; Srilekha was my source of inspiration and support, and my daughter Sohini a cause of distraction and happiness as ever.

For all the errors in this book I alone remain responsible.

January 2004 **Sekhar Bandyopadhyay**

Introduction
The Historiography of Caste in Bengal

As Western observers struggled to grapple with the complexities of Indian social organisation, it became a major subject of their academic pursuits and ethnological stereotyping. The early missionaries and the Orientalists believed that religion was the primary basis of social organisation in the subcontinent, a stereotype that was later officially recognised and legitimated by the colonial empirical inquiries of the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries. This 'colonial sociology' rather simplistically argued that Indian society was primarily divided into two religious categories, the Hindus and the Muslims, while the former were further subdivided into mutually exclusive castes. Thus, as far as the Hindus were concerned, as Eric Stokes tells us,[1] the early sociological generalisation, shared by a wide range of observers from Alfred Lyall to Max Weber, would have us believe that it was essentially religion which strung all kindred groups into the great circle of castes, thus providing a discontinuity between the social and political systems and preventing the institutionalising of an egalitarian ethic essential to a market economy. This generalisation thus tended to introduce first a discourse of backwardness, and then what Bernard Cohn has called a 'discourse of differentiation'.[2]

Recent academic debates on caste have revolved round this stereotypical image of Indian society, as this colonial knowledge has survived the process of decolonisation. The intellectual intervention of modern structuralist sociologists, notably that of Louis Dumont[3]

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[1] Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge: 1978), pp. 20–23.

[2] Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: 1986), p. 284

[3] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicas* (London: 1972).

has provided further theoretical sophistication to this particular way of conceptualising India. Dumont has argued that the structure of Indian society was constructed around a single true principle, expressed through religious idioms. It was the idea of 'hierarchy' based on the binary opposition of purity and pollution that determined the relative rank of castes and also controlled the relationship between them. The 'encompassing of the contrary' was the central idea of Indian social structure, in which the secular domain was encompassed and subordinated by the religious. For the more recent supporters of Dumont, T. N. Madan for example, any 'search for secular elements' in Indian cultural traditions, is 'a futile exercise',[4] because in this culture the power of the king is supposedly subordinated to the authority of the priests.

To many sociologists and social historians, however, this overemphasis on the religious orientation of Indian society seems to be an oversimplification of the situation. Historically, the structure of Indian society has been so complex that it defies any such straightforward definition. It is indeed difficult to offer a universal definition of caste that would have a pan-Indian applicability. Edmund Leach,[5] therefore, instead of offering a definition has only identified five distinctive features distinguishing this system and these are: hierarchy, endogamy, hereditary occupation, untouchability and restrictions on commensality. But given the wide cultural diversities of India, it is difficult to find all these features in the same form or content in all the regions of the subcontinent. Again, during the colonial period, there were other processes of cultural change, for example, Sanskritisation', 'Westernisation' or 'Secularisation',[6] which further transposed the ritual system and altered the patterns of interaction between individuals and groups. But this happened in different ways in different regions, as colonial rule had a differential impact on Indian society. In view of these diversities, the fourfold *varna* system, which now had very little relevance to reality, provided perhaps the only civilisational notion of ranking.[7] It was for this reason alone—for the sake of easier communication across the regions—that various

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[4] T. N. Madan (ed.) *Religion in India* (New Delhi: 1992), p. 402.

[5] E. R. Leach (ed.), *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon, North West Pakistan* (Cambridge: 1960).

[6] For details, see M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: 1963).

[7] Andre Beteille, *Society and Politics in India: Essays in Comparative Perspective* (London, Atlantic Highlands: 1991), p. 44.

regional castes continued to indicate their rank in terms of *varna* rather than caste.[8]

One major feature of the caste system, which in fact negates the basic thrust of 'colonial sociology' and the Dumontian argument, is that it has never been just a cultural category. It had important functional significance too, as each caste was associated with a hereditary traditional occupation that was indicative also of a social division of labour. It is here that caste could perhaps be compared with class, which can best be defined in terms of the forces and relations of production and ownership of property. But the major problem about this assumption of a caste—class continuum arises from the supposed difference in the nature of inter-group relationship in the two systems of social organisation. In the caste system, this relationship is conceptualised as one of 'economic interdependence',[9] resting on the 'bonds of co-operation';[10] the hierarchy, therefore, is never dissolved, as the 'functional specialisation and hierarchy are organically linked in the system'.[11] The relationship between the classes is, on the other hand, one of competition, or in the Marxian sense, of 'hostile opposition'.[12] The complexities in the class structure are ultimately expected to be reduced to a binary opposition between the two classes, the haves and the have-nots. F. G. Bailey has therefore distinguished between the two systems of stratification by describing the former as a 'closed organic stratification' and the latter as 'segmentary stratification', co-operation and competition being the two principles determining inter-group relationship in the two systems.[13]

To some scholars, however, these differences between the caste and class systems appear to be more notional than real. The idea of the absence of conflict or opposition in inter-caste relationships, as

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[8] M. N. Srinivas, 'Varna and Caste', reprinted in Dipankar Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification* (New Delhi: 1992), p. 33.

[9] E. R. Leach, *Aspects of Caste…*

[10] Nirmal Kumar Bose, *The Structure of Hindu Society*, translated from Bengali by Andre Beteille (New Delhi: 1975).

[11] Surojit Sinha, 'Caste in India: Its Essential Pattern of Socio-Cultural Integration', in Anthony de Reuck and Julie Knight (eds), *Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches* (London: 1968), p. 94.

[12] Quoted from 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon', in Lewis S. Feur (ed.), *Karl Marx & Frederick Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (Glasgow: 1969), p. 12.

[13] F. G. Bailey, 'Closed Social Stratification in India', *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1963.

some of them think, has indeed been 'overdrawn',[14] because of an undue reliance on the *shastra (*scriptures), which is in itself a legacy of the colonial ethnological discourse.[15] If there was co-operation at the economic level, it was more imposed than voluntary, as was also the acceptance of the cultural attributes of rank and of the social roles indicated by it. This became possible as in most cases there was a close correspondence between the secular and ritual ranks of individuals;[16] the class situation in Indian society, according to some scholars, often expressed itself through the religious idioms of caste; or, one could find class content in caste forms.[17] According to the Ambedkarite position, castes were 'enclosed classes', and in this sense it was even worse than the class system, as it did not allow for mobility or dynamic social interaction.[18]

The theoretical strand which assumes the existence of 'intersections' where caste and class converge, may run into difficulty when it comes to the consideration of social mobility, which indicates also the possibilities of divergence. It is impossible to deny that occupational mobility had been present in the Indian caste system at every period of its history[19] and colonial rule is believed to have further facilitated this dispersal of wealth and power across caste lines. This increasing occupational and consequently status differentiation within each caste may therefore also lead us to the most valid conclusion

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[14] Yogendra Singh, *Social Stratification and Change in India* (New Delhi: 1977), p. 12.

[15] For a further discussion on the colonial ethnological discourses see, Bernard S. Cohn, 'Notes on the History of the Study of Indian Society and Culture', in Milton Singer and B. S. Cohn (eds), *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (Chicago: 1968); Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India'; Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past'; both articles in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: 1990).

[16] S. Sinha, 'Caste in India'; A. R. Desai (ed.), *Rural Sociology in India* (Bombay: 1969).

[17] Joan Mencher, 'The Caste System Upside Down, or the Not-So-Mysterious East', *Current Antropology*, vol. 15, 1974; Claude Meillasoux, 'Are There Castes in India?', *Economy and Society,* vol. 3, 1973; S. Patil, 'Caste and Class', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number, February, 1979.

[18] For a recent statement of this position, see Kancha Illiah, 'Towards the Dalitization of the Nation', in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State* (New Delhi: 1998), p. 268.

[19] James Silverberg (ed.), *Social Mobility in the Caste System in India* (The Hague: 1968).

that caste and class, though they often coincided, could also cut across.[20] However, as empirical evidence suggests, in many, if not all, cases such discrepancies between caste ascribed status (or ritual rank) and caste irrelevant (economic or political) roles were gradually resolved and the cultural notions of ritual rank, based on notions of purity and impurity, began to reflect the actuality of the distributive pattern of wealth and power in society. The caste system, in other words, was never a static or 'rigid' system of stratification to be distinguished from the class system, which is supposed to be 'fluid'.[21] Indian caste society, as Owen Lynch has argued, always maintained a 'dynamic equilibrium' between ritual and secular status.[22]

But how was, if at all, this equilibrium maintained? This brings us to the power aspect of caste society. Nicholas Dirks has shown that caste in pre-colonial south India was never just a religious concept based on notions of purity and pollution. The king was not subordinate to the priest; the crown was never hollow. On the contrary, caste ranking was measured by distance from the crown, legitimated by royal authority and associated notions of honour.[23] 'In fact', as Dirks argues in his second book, *Castes of Mind*, 'caste had always been political—it had been shaped in fundamental ways by political struggles and processes'.[24] Gail Omvedt has also argued, from a different perspective though, that Indian 'caste feudalism' was consolidated through an alliance of Brahmanism and state power. Colonial rule used this caste structure, transformed it and to a large extent strengthened it to its own benefit.[25] Dipankar Gupta brings this discussion to the contemporary period with an emphatic assertion that 'secular power is the final arbiter of caste'.[26]

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[20] Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: 1971).
[21] Victor D'Souza, 'Measurement of Rigidity-Fluidity Dimension of Social Stratification in Six Indian Villages', *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1969, p. 35, cited in Y. Singh, *Social Stratification and Change in India*, p. 23.
[22] Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City of India* (New York, London: 1969), p. 12.
[23] Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*: *Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: 1987).
[24] Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, Oxford: 2001), p. 13.
[25] Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: 1994).
[26] Dipankar Gupta, *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society* (New Delhi: 2000), p. 136.

Caste may, therefore, be defined, by borrowing an expression from Dirks, as a 'cultural construction of power'.[27] As a cultural construct, it tended to continually change to reflect the actual relations of power in Indian society, even though colonial rule changed the context within which these power relations were located. The resolution of status discrepancies in this changing social scenario could be achieved because of the hegemonic power exercised by the dominant castes, which would defend their position by co-opting the upwardly mobile groups into the existing power structure. Social protests, attempting to subvert these relations of power, were, on the other hand, either suppressed or gradually peripheralised. The muffling of such voices of protest, thus, only sets the normality of domination and hierarchy into sharper focus. This book does not deny the importance of protest, but seeks to unravel how the higher castes maintain their domination and ideological hegemony in Hindu society, despite such contestation. To set this discussion in context, we shall try here to find out how this complex issue of interplay between caste, culture and power has been addressed in the existing historical literature on Bengal.

II

The first systematic study of pre-colonial Bengali society began with the Christian missionaries and the Orientalist observations on indigenous society. To the missionaries, as well as to the early official observers like J. S. Mill, the caste system was an unmitigated evil, an important reason for Indian backwardness and the most powerful impediment to the spread of Christianity. To the Orientalist scholars, on the other hand, it was a system that provided for stability and order in the indigenous society and therefore needed to be respected and studied. From the ancient Indian scriptures they tried to retrieve and reconstruct a picture of an ideal Hindu society that was governed by religion and ordered by caste. This was a society, which had its own code of law that was dominated by the Brahmans, whose power depended on a monopoly of scriptural knowledge. It was divided into endogamous sub-castes or *jatis*, which had distinctive rituals, separate

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[27] Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, p. 5. He has clarified his position further in a subsequent article, '…caste structure, ritual form, and political process were all dependent on relations of power. These relations were constituted in and through history, and these relations were culturally constructed.' Nicholas Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', *Representations*, vol. 37, Winter 1992.

social rights and varied disabilities. Yet, they were tied together by the power of religion and the dominance of the Brahman.[28]

This scriptural approach to the understanding of Indian society set the tone for the subsequent empirical studies of the colonial period. As empire expanded, there was the need to understand the subject society and the colonial ethnographers were pressed into action. The tradition of official studies that started with Buchanan Hamilton's survey of Bengal and Bihar in the early nineteenth century, continued with the decennial census reports since 1872 and the publications of the civilian-turned-ethnographers, beginning from Dalton and Sherring in the early nineteenth century, Wise, Hunter and Risley in the late nineteenth, to O'Malley, Hutton and Blunt in the early twentieth century.[29] The purpose of these ethnographic studies was to codify knowledge of the actual Indian social situation based on empirical research. But they could never get away from the scriptural stereotypes of the Orientalist period, often confusing the real and the ideal and sometimes consciously trying to impose their preconceived models on the field level data in pursuance of an imperialist agenda. Particularly significant here was the arbitrary attempt to fit in all the sub-castes into a racial model of Aryan–non-Aryan dichotomy.[30] Although secular factors and economic parameters were sometimes taken into consideration, the basic thesis remained unchanged. The power of religion and the dominance of the Brahman were still thought to be the bonding factors in Hindu caste society. Even

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[28] More details in Bernard Cohn, 'Notes on the Study of Indian society and Culture', pp. 6–15; Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, chapters 2 and 3; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal, 1872–1937* (Calcutta: 1991), pp. 22–24.

[29] Large parts of Buchanan Hamilton's report later appeared in Montgomery R. Martin, *History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India* (London: 1938); M. A. Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes,* 3 vols (1872, reprint, New Delhi: 1974); W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal,* 6 vols (1875–77, reprint, New Delhi: 1973); James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal* (London: 1883); H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal,* 2 vols (1891, reprint, Calcutta: 1981); J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India* (fourth edn, New Delhi: 1973); L. S. S. O'Malley, *Indian Caste Customs* (1932, reprint, Calcutta: 1976).

[30] A critical study of this colonial ethnography may be found in B. S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi: 1987); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, chapters 1–3; and S.Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj,* chapter 1.

indigenous observers writing in the late nineteenth century about Bengali caste society, could not get away from these stereotypical images.[31] The census of 1901, presided over by H. H. Risley, conveyed the idea of a rigidly structured hierarchy, where everyone had a fixed location and a universal ritual rank. However, Risley's own field reports would suggest that caste rank varied enormously from district to district even within the same linguistic region of Bengal.[32]

The systematic study of pre-colonial caste society in Bengal started with the publication of Niharranjan Ray's *Bangalir Itihas* (History of the Bengali People) in 1949 and it offered an altogether different approach. The textual knowledge was now situated within its political and economic contexts. The rigours of the caste system, Ray argued, were not that strict in Bengal as they were in the heartland of the Aryan civilisation. This was mainly because of the late beginning of the process of Aryanisation and the simultaneous existence of a more liberal indigenous tribal culture, which constantly interacted with the orthodox *varna* culture and diluted it, even after the establishment of an Aryan state in the fifth century A.D. The dominance of the Brahmanical religion was further contested by Buddhism under such ruling dynasties as the Palas between the eighth and the twelfth centuries, the Kambojas in northern and eastern Bengal in the tenth century and the Chandras in eastern and southern Bengal between the tenth and the eleventh centuries. It was the resurgence of Brahmanism under the Sen-Barman hegemony in the eleventh—thirteenth century that led to the formalisation of the *varna* social organisation in Bengal, rigorously structured by a number of orthodox *smritikaras*, including the Sen king Ballala Sen himself, who is well known for introducing *kulinism* as another form of social differentiation.[33]

Kunal Chakrabarti has, however, shown more recently that the influence of Buddhism in Bengal was clearly waning since the eighth century, as the ascendancy of Brahmanism was in the process of being firmly established since the post-Gupta period. As the migration

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[31] For example, J. N. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects* (Calcutta: 1896).

[32] This comes out very clearly in my own study of Risley's field reports, still preserved in the India Office Library. See S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (Richmond, Surrey: 1997), p. 16.

[33] Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas, Adi Parba*, vol. I (1949, reprint, Calcutta: 1980), pp. 277–80, 296–306, this book is now available in English translation as *History of the Bengali People*, translated by John W. Wood (Calcutta: 1994).

of Brahmans increased during this period to the regions that were once peripheral to the Aryan civilisation, there was a concerted effort to establish the hegemony of the Brahmanic culture, its foundational principle being the *varnashram dharma*. It was done, as Chakrabarti shows, through a careful process of incorporation of indigenous cultural symbols—such as the worship of local goddesses—into the structure of Vedic religion. The local traditions contested this hegemony, and the Brahmans accepted them only very grudgingly. However, what was created as a result of this acculturation process was a regional culture, which Chakrabarti describes as a 'syncretic socio-religious system'. There was now an 'institutionalisation of the brahmanical principle of social organization—the caste hierarchy'; but this orthodox reaction also allowed a degree of flexibility.[34] So in the thirteenth century, when Islam began to spread in the frontier regions of Bengal, as Richard Eaton has shown, peasants residing at the periphery of the *varna* society adopted it as the religion of the plough, rather than as an emancipatory ideology breaking the bonds of caste.[35] Later in the fifteenth century, the Bhakti movement initiated in Bengal by Sri Chaitanya had a further corroding effect on the caste system. Partha Chatterjee's *Subaltern Studies* article has discussed the theoretical implications of this subversive role of Bhakti,[36] while Ramakanta Chakravarti's *magnum opus* on Bengal Vaishnavism has shown how the ideology of Bhakti offered a 'theological platform whereupon the highest and the lowest might stand with equal rights'. There had been a vigorous conservative attempt, since the age of *Navyasmriti* (fifteenth–sixteenth century) to reinforce the disciplines of caste. If under this influence the dominant Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition became more orthodox, side-by-side, as Chakravarti has chronicled, there was also the rise, mainly in the eighteenth century, of various 'deviant orders' or the Sahajiya Vaishnava cults under non-Brahman gurus, who successfully interrogated the ideology of hierarchy.[37]

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[34] Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (New Delhi: 2001); quotations from pp. 16, 32.

[35] Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 1993).

[36] Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Subaltern Consciousness', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: 1989), pp. 186–94.

[37] Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1985), pp. 76–78 and *passim*.

Pre-colonial Bengali society, in other words, was never so rigidly structured or hopelessly immobile, as was textualised by some of the conservative medieval *smritikaras*, whom the British Orientalists studied so diligently. The literary evidence of the *Mangalakavya,* pertaining to the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries, would also bear this out. This literary evidence clearly shows that medieval Bengali society was segmented and hierarchised, but never strictly segregated. For example, the Chandalas, or the proverbial outcasts of traditional India, are described in the *Chandimangala* as the rightful dwellers of the city; they were not treated as *antebasi* or those who lived outside or at the edges of human habitation as enjoined by Manu.[38] The other aspect of the pre-colonial Bengali society, which Niharranjan Ray's study had conclusively shown, was that since the Gupta period, as a settled agricultural economy expanded in Bengal, the linkages between caste and class became more visible, with those providing physical labour losing status to those who refrained from it, but controlled land, such as the Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya, the three traditional *uchchajati* (higher castes) of Bengal.[39] This secular aspect of caste formation was further developed in another seminal work, *Social Mobility in Bengal* by Hitesranjan Sanyal, which appeared in 1981. In the introduction to this book, Sanyal showed how, as a result of occupational specialisation, and not just ritual differentiation, sub-castes were emerging in pre-colonial Bengal through a constant process of fusion and fission. This was a society that permitted occupational mobility in keeping with the changes in the opportunity structure. Breaking of new wasteland, technological innovations or commercial success resulted in social mobility that could be incorporated into the structure of the society. Although such sub-castes 'were knit together in a system of co-operation and interdependence', Sanyal argued, the high ritual rank of the upper castes 'was related to the material power and prosperity they represented.'[40]

Sanyal's second argument about positive correlation between ritual rank and material power negates, however, his first argument about 'co-operation and interdependence'. If we take his first argument and

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[38] See for example, Mukundaram, *Chandimangal*, edited by Sukumar Sen (New Delhi: 1975), pp. 77–81; Vijaya Gupta, *Manasamangal*, edited by Basanta Kumar Bhattacharya (Calcutta: n.d.), pp. 4, 59–61; Bharatchandra, *Annadamangal*, in Brojendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das (eds), *Bharatchandra Granthabali* (third edn, Calcutta: 1369 B.S.), pp. 170–71.

[39] N. Ray, *Bangalir Itihas,* pp. 324–25.

[40] H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1981), pp. 18–19, 26.

look at the situation from below, then this 'co-operation and interdependence' would appear as acts of subordination and compulsion, not of volition, and therefore products of specific relations of power. This then brings us to the power aspect of this social institution of caste. Long before the much acclaimed 'Hollow Crown' thesis was offered by Nicholas Dirks about the power of the pre-colonial kings, Ronald Inden had touched upon this subject in relation to the medieval Hindu chiefdoms in Bengal. In a 1967 article, he had shown, on the basis of the evidence of the *Mangalakavya*, that the territorial chiefs or Rajas of Bengal and below them the *zamindars,* whose power was seldom restrained by interference from the central state, ruled over the *samajas* or the hierarchy of castes living within their territories.[41] In his subsequent book, Inden further drew our attention to 'the central role played by the king in maintaining proper order' in a caste society, where performance of the appropriate codes of conduct or *jatidharma* determined the rank of each group. Where deviations took place and new castes emerged through improper mixing of bodily substance, it was only the king, acting on the advice of the Brahmans, who could legitimise such a disorderly situation by accommodating the new groups into the hierarchy.[42] Discipline and order in pre-colonial Bengali society were thus maintained through this power structure of the Raja–pundit nexus.

The system continued into the early colonial period, when gradually it was replaced by its more modern variant, a new institution called *dal* (social factions), which S. N. Mukherjee's research brought attention to.[43] The *dals*, with their networks stretching from metropolitan Calcutta far into the interior of the province, performed the same functions of social control as the older *samajas*, with their reach now being regional, rather than local or territorial as in the olden days. Advised by knowledgeable pundits, the powerful *dalapatis* (leaders), many of whom were the wealthy zamindars or the new rich of Calcutta, exerted an informal but substantive control over the realms of caste rules and customary laws, the colonial courts seldom trying to arrogate this authority. As the colonial state tolerated such indigenous focuses of power, they continued till about the end of the

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[41] Ronald Inden, 'The Hindu Chiefdom in Middle Bengali Literature', in Edward C. Dimock Jr. (ed.), *Bengal: Literature and History* (East Lansing, Michigan: 1967).

[42] Ronald Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture* (New Delhi: 1976), pp. 52–53.

[43] S. N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Myths and History* (Calcutta: 1971).

nineteenth century. And then, only gradually, with the development of a capitalist economy, such networks of relationships started breaking down.[44] The Dumontian theory of 'encompassing the contrary' hardly stands in the face of such findings on pre-colonial and early colonial Bengal.

But this does not mean that the religious and cultural aspects were not important—indeed this was a social situation where the sacred and the profane were so intimately intertwined that it was difficult to differentiate one from the other. The dominant power of the religious ideology of caste can be noticed in its obvious influence on tribal communities, which lived at the periphery of the settled *varna* society. As mentioned earlier, a constant interaction between the two cultures transformed both. While the *varna* system in Bengal became less rigid, the tribes also became 'Hinduised'—a process which the pioneer Bengali anthropologist, Nirmal Kumar Bose, has described as the 'Hindu method of tribal absorption'.[45] But this process too had an aspect of power. In a number of cases, the tribal leaders, after acquisition of land rights and appropriation of political power through state formation, committed themselves to the process of 'Hinduisation', in order to legitimise their new authority and improve their status in caste society. They patronised the Brahmans and the latter provided religious sanction for their elevated social status. The ideal examples of this process of acculturation in the early colonial period are the Koch/Rajbansis of North Bengal, studied by Shinkichi Taniguchi and others,[46] and the Bhumij-Kshatriyas of Purulia and the adjacent areas of Singbhum district, investigated by Surajit Sinha.[47] However, as their researches would indicate, this transformation was never complete or universal, as residues of tribal culture continued to exist in their religious customs and social behaviour.

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[44] John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadralok in Calcutta, 1857–1885* (Canberra: 1983), p. 35.

[45] Nirmal Kumar Bose, 'The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption', *Science and Culture*, vol. 8, 1941, pp. 188–98.

[46] S. Taniguchi, 'The Rajbanshi Community and the Changing Structure of Land Tenure in the Koch Bihar Princely State', in S. Taniguchi (eds), *Economic Changes and Social Transformation in Modern and Contemporary South Asia* (Tokyo: 1994); Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910–1947* (New Delhi: 2003).

[47] S. Sinha, 'The Media and Nature of Hindu-Bhumij Interactions', *Journal of the Asiatic Society, Letters and Science*, vol. XXIII, no. 1, 1957; also by the same author 'Bhumij-Kshatriya Social Movement in South Manbhum', *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology*, vol. VIII, no. 2, July 1959.

The changes of the colonial period or more precisely the impact of colonial rule on the structure of Bengali caste society have been the subject of a more intense debate among historians. Studies on colonial society began with Nirmal Kumar Bose's *Hindu Samajer Garan* (The Structure of Hindu Society), published in 1949.[48] Bose thought that the impact was fundamental in one sense: while pre-colonial caste society was non-competitive and based on co-operative economic relations, colonial rule brought in competition and conflict. To what extent was pre-colonial society non-competitive or non-discordant is a problematic that we have discussed already and it certainly needs more probing. But colonial rule apparently created more opportunities for diffusion of wealth and power across caste lines. Land became a marketable commodity; education and public employment were thrown open to talent; and the European Companies seeking Indian collaborators opened up commercial opportunities. In other words, colonial rule created more opportunities for social mobility—a theme which was further developed by Hitesranjan Sanyal.[49] He too started from the premise, as noticed earlier, of a non-competitive pre-colonial society, but developed the theme of social mobility through intensive case studies of specific caste groups, such as the trading Tilis, pastoral Gops or the agricultural Mahishyas. Following the Srinivas model of 'Sanskritisation', he showed how up and pushing families of these castes patronised the Brahmans, constructed temples and adopted other ritual symbols in order to legitimise their new wealth and status. Since then, individual case studies on socially mobile castes, or studies on the general impact of colonial rule on Bengali caste society have proliferated, with contributions from a wide range of scholars with varied ideological orientations.[50]

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[48] *Hindu Samajer Garan* is available in English translation as *The Structure of Hindu Society*, translated by Andre Beteille (New Delhi: 1975).

[49] H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, chapters 1 and 3.

[50] We may mention here Taniguchi's work referred to earlier; also, Jyotirmoyee Sarma, *Caste Dynamics among the Bengali Hindus* (Calcutta: 1980); Amitabha Mukhopadhyay, *Jatibhedpratha O Unish Sataker Bangali Samaj* (Calcutta: 1981); Narendranath Bhattacharya, *Bharatiya Jativarna Pratha* (Calcutta: 1987); Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement;* Sibsankar Mukherjee, 'The Social Role of a Caste Association', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1994, pp. 89–100; Smriti Kumar Sarkar, 'Caste, Occupation and Social Mobility: A Study of the Kansaris of Colonial Bengal', and Ratan Lal Chakraborty, 'A Caste Movement in Mymensingh' (a study of the Bhuimalis), both articles in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Abhijit Dasgupta and Willem van Schendel (eds), *Bengal: Communities, Development and States* (New Delhi: 1994); and also my own book referred to earlier, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*.

If Nirmal Kumar Bose talked about changes in the material context of caste during the colonial period, he also emphasised that these changes were of a very limited nature. Access to the higher professions or greater opportunities in life were restricted only to the upper stratum of the society, constituted by the three higher castes of Bengal—the Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya. In other words, social mobility generated by colonial rule, although it was not totally fictional, was nevertheless very restricted.[51] This important position of Nirmal Bose was later corroborated by another seminal study on the economic structure of rural Bengal during the British period by sociologist Ramkrishna Mukherjee. He showed that the caste system continued into the colonial period not only because the early colonial administrators patronised Brahmanism for their own political benefits. The system survived because it could dovetail itself into the new economic structure that emerged under British rule. In his threefold classification of rural colonial society, the pre-colonial *'usurper castes'* who previously lived on taxes and tributes moved into the new Class I of wealthy 'landholders and supervisory farmers'; the former *'producing castes'* fitted into the new Class II of 'self-working artisans, peasants and traders' and the previous '*serving castes*' could find place only at the bottom as a Class III of 'sharecroppers and agricultural labourers'.[52]

One problem with Mukherjee's theory is that it does not take into account the differential impact of colonial rule on the members of the same caste. But its major significance is that it indicates the limited nature of change in the material context of caste during the British period. This finding received further substantiation in other researches based on the census reports of the early twentieth century (1901–31). The census occupation data may be taken as indicators of certain broad trends, but certainly not as a faithful representation of reality.[53] Such words of caution notwithstanding, these data for Bengal rather overwhelmingly show that social mobility of this period was very limited and rarely was there a movement from the bottom

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[51] In this regard, see particularly Nirmal Bose's other article: 'Some Aspects of Caste in Bengal', in Milton Singer (ed.), *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (Philadelphia: 1959).

[52] Ramkrishna Mukherjee, *The Dynamics of a Rural Society: A Study of the Economic Structure in Bengal Village* (Berlin: 1957), pp. 80–102 and passim.

[53] For more discussion on the hazards of using census data for such purposes, see Frank F. Conlon, 'The Census of India as a Source for the Historical Study of Religion and Caste', in N. Gerald Barrier (ed.), *The Census in British India; New Perspectives* (New Delhi: 1981).

up. Sizeable sections of the population could still be found in their hereditary caste occupations, implying a differential impact of development. Therefore, if there was restricted mobility, it was certainly individual and not corporate, and, as a result, class lines cut across caste boundaries.[54]

III

Social mobility in various degrees and forms has been present in Bengal's social life since pre-colonial times, as Hitesranjan Sanyal has shown in his book. Indeed, he has argued that the caste system was able to survive for such a long time because of this inner dynamism or ability to accommodate upward social mobility and thereby absorb tensions from below.[55] Colonial rule, by opening up English education and creating some new opportunities in public employment and the professions, made the process more widespread and perhaps relatively easier. What now became almost ubiquitous was a desire to move up the social ladder and to have that mobility legitimated through recognition in the decennial census reports. The colonial state not only encouraged such tendencies, but also actively helped the process through its policy of 'protective discrimination'. Apart from questionable altruistic motives, it had a clear political agenda too. An increasingly unpopular colonial rule could easily be legitimised through the support of the lower castes[56] at a time when nationalism was in the grips of a powerful *bhadralok* elite, belonging primarily, but not exclusively, to the three traditional upper castes of Bengal.[57] Exclusive

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[54] See for details, S.Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 95–130.

[55] H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, pp. 27, 33–64.

[56] For a detailed discussion on caste and the protective discrimination policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 52–84.

[57] Ultimately, J. H. Broomfield's theory of *bhadralok* domination of Bengali nationalism has come to stay, though not everybody accepts the way he sketched the contours of this politics. Various later works, written from a variety of ideological vantage points, have all demonstrated that throughout the twentieth century, nationalist politics in Bengal was dominated by the *bhadralok* who belonged mainly, though not exclusively, to the Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya castes. See, J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: 1968); Leonard A. Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement, 1876–1940* (New York, London: 1974); Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903–1908* (New Delhi: 1977); Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict*

caste associations, in place of the earlier multi-caste *dals*, therefore, began to proliferate during this period, with the specific purposes of organising self-improvement, as also sharing power within the ambit of the new colonial institutions. As devolution of power started gradually from 1909, for many of these organisations of the 'Depressed Classes'—as they were now known in official parlance—separate caste representation became a non-negotiable minimum demand.[58]

But what really were the motivations behind these organised caste movements of the early twentieth century? Was it an aspiration for higher status and the sharing of power in institutional politics? Or was it a form of protest against the inequities and, more particularly, the ideologies of the caste system? Historians' opinion on the Depressed Classes movements that took place across the subcontinent is divided on this issue. Some historians think that it was the social and political aspirations of the socially mobile groups that resulted in such movements. They used caste identity as political capital to gain advantages in the newly emerging institutional political structure of colonial India. Caste as a result got ethnicised.[59] Others, however, feel that these were protests against the ideology of hierarchy and the monopoly of power that the caste system sanctified. And, therefore, they were the means to subvert the status quo, or 'anti-systemic movements' that sought to transform the structure of Indian society.[60] Bengal has had her equal share of this historical debate.

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and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875–1927 (New Delhi: 1984); Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–47* (Cambridge: 1995).

[58] For a comprehensive survey of organised 'Depressed Classes' politics until 1937, see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj,* pp. 142–84.

[59] See, for example, F. G. Bailey, *Caste and Economic Frontier* (New Delhi: 1958), p. VII; R. L. Hardgrave Jr.,*The Nadars of Tamilnad* (Bombay: 1969), p. 263; E. Zelliot, 'Learning the Use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra', in R. Kothari (ed.), *Caste in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: 1973), p. 39; D. Washbrook, 'The Development of Caste Organisation in South India, 1880 to 1925', in C. J. Baker and D. A. Washbrook (eds), *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880–1940* (New Delhi: 1975), pp. 176–77.

[60] See, for example, K.Gough, 'Indian Nationalism and Ethnic Freedom', in David Bidney (ed.), *The Concept of Freedom in Anthropology* (The Hague: 1963), pp. 174–75; H. Jha, 'Lower Caste Peasants and Upper Caste Zamindars in Bihar (1921–1925): An Analysis of Sanskritisation and Contradiction between the Two Groups', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XIV, no. 4, 1977, p. 56; G. Pandey, 'Rallying Round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpuri Region, c.1888–1917', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: 1983), pp. 71–74; Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: 1994), p. 14.

Most of the general studies on caste movements in Bengal followed the usual social mobility model[61] that actually originated from Srinivas's theory of 'Sanskritisation' and 'Westernisation'. Limited social mobility, it is argued, led to the organisation of caste associations which sought to legitimise their new position by publishing journals which preached refinement of social behaviour and the adoption of purer ritual symbols, like the wearing of the sacred thread, or prohibitions on widow remarriage, introduction of dowry and child marriage and finally claiming census recognition of their higher ritual status. The effects of such Sanskritising efforts were greater restrictions on women, as they came to represent the 'honour' of the community that needed to be protected; the unfreedom of women thus became more widely prevalent across all social strata in late colonial Bengal, frustrating the reformist attempts of the Bengali liberals. Simultaneous with this, attempts at Westernisation were reflected in the demands for reservation in education, jobs and the legislature and finally, in opposition to nationalism in the support of a benevolent British Raj that had supposedly overturned the rule of Manu. There were of course variations in individual situations, the Ranbansis, for example, having a pre-history of state formation, and the prosperous Kansaris (bell-metal workers) being threatened by the coming of new cheaper mass-produced colonial products. These groups, therefore, had different motivations to organise for social action.[62] But such variations notwithstanding, their politics in general remained alienated from the 'integrationist' politics of the Indian National Congress. And they ended up seeking only positional improvement for themselves within the existing caste structure and thus endorsing the ideology of hierarchy enshrined in that system.

What this familiar discourse tends to ignore, however, is the element of protest involved in all such behaviour. Sanskritisation, for example, not only implied emulation of the upper castes, it also meant the appropriation of certain exclusive symbols of power and divesting them of their symbolic significance. When the lower castes started wearing sacred threads, the most authentic symbol of social authority, the Bengali *bhadralok* began to ridicule it as *siki paysar*

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[61] This is true for most of the works mentioned earlier, by S. Taniguchi, Swaraj Basu, Smriti Kumar Sarkar, Ratanlal Chakrabarty, including my first book, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*.

[62] S. Taniguchi, 'The Rajbanshi Community…'; S. K. Sarkar, 'Caste, Occupation and Social Mobility…'.

suto or a thread worth a quarter of a dime.[63] On the other hand, it was not merely self-interest which motivated the leaders of the 'Depressed Classes' to Westernise or seek concessions from the colonial state; they also constructed an 'ideology' that was based on a different perception of history vis-à-vis that of the dominant nationalist organisations. While for the nationalists the colonial period represented a break with a glorious past, for the leaders of the Depressed Classes the present was an improvement over a darker past, when caste rules governed the state and society. The Bengali word *jati* in this charged political environment began to acquire different meanings; while the nationalists privileged it to mean the 'nation', the Depressed Classes stuck to its traditional meaning of 'caste'.[64] We can hardly understand the significance of this social process if we ignore these alternative cultural usages of language that indicated both alienation and protest.

An important deviation from this familiar model is, however, Partha Chatterjee's article, 'Caste and Subaltern Consciousness'. In this essay, Chatterjee has taken his gaze away from the educated leaders of the Depressed Classes or the landed magnates of the middle peasant castes, and has focused on the consciousness of the people at the grassroots level. Using the ground level data on the Balahadi sect among the Hadis of Nadia district, studied by Sudhir Chakrabarti,[65] he has sought to 'disinter' Dumont by unraveling the story of the Hadis' religious insubordination. Dumont's claim that the ideological force of dharma always binds the individual castes to the whole system and that this ideal always actualises in the immediate social realities of castes, can be questioned, he suggests, by showing that 'this process of actualisation necessarily contains a contradiction'. Here the contradiction is represented by the philosophy of the Balahadi sect, where the teacher among the Hadis defies the dominance of dharma, Chatterjee argues, by preaching a novel theory of creation, by constructing a new cosmology and by imagining an inverted hierarchy of castes, where a Hadi, an archetypal untouchable caste of Bengal, is placed at the top as the supreme creator and the Brahmans pushed to the bottom. However, Chatterjee also acknowledges the triviality or marginality of such insubordination, which ultimately

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[63] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Development, Defferentiation and Caste: The Namasudra Movement in Bengal, 1872–1947', in S. Bandyopadhyay et al. (eds), *Bengal: Communities, Development and States*, p. 98.

[64] S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 155–56, 163–64.

[65] Sudhir Chakrabarti, *Balahadi sampraday ar tader gan* (Calcutta: 1986).

failed to affect or alter the system.[66] This acknowledgment comes through clearly in his subsequent book, where in the history of 'interaction between the dominant and the subordinate', in this case the 'nation and its outcasts', he identifies the 'practical defeat' of a 'resolute spirit of negativity'.[67]

Without minimizing the importance of protest or the unfortunate implications of its defeat, we may, however, also talk about the limitations of protest itself. The caste orientated notions of status and the associated conditions of labour were enforced as much by persuasion and consent as by coercion.[68] In other words, expressions or implications of protest notwithstanding, the mental worlds of the subjugated might well have been hegemonised by the ideological structures of the dominant. In the case of the Balahadis, they could only imagine an inversion of the social hierarchy, but not its dissolution, because the modernist democratic alternative of equality was not culturally available to them. But what is more important is that, in the course of time, the later followers of the sect decided to shed some of the early radicalism of the first preceptor and began to adopt life cycle rituals from the repertoire of mainstream Hinduism.[69] And, as Ratan Lal Chakraborty has shown, their counterparts in east Bengal, the Bhuimalis of Mymensingh district, were during the same period following the familiar model of social mobility, within and not outside the ideological structure of the caste system.[70] This brings us to the question of the ideological hegemony of caste, which was constantly reproduced and reinforced by the power elite of Hindu society, who were dominant not just in a religious sense, but in a temporal sense too.

Respecting the normative strictures of caste became mandatory for all Hindus, high and low. While some marginal changes in behaviour or positional improvements in status were tolerated, any challenge to the fundamentals was resisted with a vengeance. The basic ideological structure was maintained by creating a fear of losing caste, which meant exclusion from the familiar world of social relations. This made any kind of social reform that might remotely threaten

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[66] P. Chatterjee, 'Caste and Subaltern Consciousness', pp. 180–81 and passim.
[67] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Princeton: 1993), p. 197.
[68] Peter Robb, 'Introduction', in P. Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (New Delhi: 1993), p. 65.
[69] S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi sampraday,* pp. 98–99.
[70] R. L. Chakraborty, 'A Caste Movement in Mymensingh'.

the fundamentals of this status hierarchy virtually impossible. The waves of Westernisation could not open the floodgates of reform, because one effective way of reinforcing the disciplines of caste was through the discourse of *adhikari-bheda*, which Sumit Sarkar has discussed. It was a discourse that recognised the individuality of each caste, having separate rituals and appropriate status, with all such units located in a 'hierarchically differentiated structure'. Thus despite limited reform and mobility, the unity of the homogenised Hindu society, and its caste based social structure, could be maintained. This classificatory scheme needs to be viewed, Sarkar insists, as 'projects of specific groups for acting on social reality'. Social differentiation is not without implications for power; it is maintained to 'the obvious advantage of established power relations of caste and gender'.[71]

This shows that the established power relations of caste society and its ideological hegemony survived and successfully adjusted to a supposedly totalising rationalist modernity. The recent literature on colonial modernity acknowledges its inability to totally displace the traditional culture of the colonised and indicates the consequent emergence of a hybrid modernity that left considerable autonomous space for the survival of cultural *difference*. In the words of Partha Chatterjee, the cultural project of Indian nationalism was 'to fashion a "modern" national culture that is nevertheless not Western.'[72] For Dipesh Chakrabarty, the project of colonial modernity in Bengal was one of 'translation' rather than 'transition', and certain elements of cultural 'difference' remained untranslatable, thus making the present 'fragmentary'. 'This is how', he explains, 'the archaic comes into the modern, not as a remnant of another time but as something constitutive of the present.'[73] None of them however specifically discuss why or how the caste system survived within this paradigm of modernity, not just as an issue of social justice, but as a way of life.

The other recent study of Bengali modernity by Rajat Ray also talks about its hybrid nature. He accepts the ontology of a 'Renaissance' and its impact on the structures of emotions and gender relations and writes this story as a narrative of progress towards modernity. The Renaissance, he argues, started in the 1890s, exposing a small group of Indians to a whole range of new ideas from the West, and creating in the process a limited civil society, which debated various issues of

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[71] S. Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: 1997), pp. 368–69 and passim.
[72] P. Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, p. 6.
[73] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, Oxford: 2000); quotation from p. 251.

public interest. This modernity gradually expanded itself and in the 1920s penetrated the countryside, thus preparing the grounds for an Indian awakening. The creation of this public space brought into existence its other, the private sphere, where emotions and sentiments remained firmly rooted in Indian tradition. India therefore had a modernity, as Ray concludes, that remained firmly anchored in her own culture.[74] This contention about the hybrid nature of Indian modernity obviously offers a possible explanation for the survival of the caste system in the cultural milieu of twentieth century Bengal. But there is also another explanation germane in the writings of both the postcolonial thinker Chakrabarty and the more modernist historian Ray. Both think that peasants, and particularly the lower castes, remained untouched by colonial modernity. 'The peasant stands', as Chakrabarty writes, 'for all that is not bourgeois (in a European sense) in Indian capitalism and modernity.' And the lower castes in particular rejected *bhadralok* modernity and its concept of brotherhood as the twentieth century wore on.[75] For Ray too, the 'lower classes did not respond so visibly to the new ideas', which influenced the high caste gentry in the early twentieth century. These ideas were only imperfectly transmitted to the intermediate peasant castes, and remained completely incomprehensible to the untouchables who remained at the fringe of the village community.[76] If we accept this position, then it will by no means appear as surprising that these classes readily accepted the hierarchy of castes and sought to define their social location within its teleological boundaries.

However, the recent caste studies, which we have mentioned already, make such observations problematic, as the lower castes, including the untouchables, do not seem to have remained untouched by the colonial modernity. They were certainly aware of and even sensitive to the nationalist assertion of cultural difference that glorified caste as the essence of Indian social organisation. Their caste movements, many of which originated in the remote villages and involved significant peasant participation at various stages, were defined within the parameters and through the vocabulary of the modern institutional public space. Their ideology was conceptualised through a skilful construction of imaginary history, and its message was communicated through a print culture, which did not just touch

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[74] Rajat K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (New Delhi: 2001).
[75] Dipesh Ckakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* pp. 11, 234.
[76] Rajat K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History,* p. 137 and passim.

the educated sections, but also reached the lower caste artisans, and also perhaps the peasants, through the tradition of 'reading aloud'.[77] So there is another point to consider, that of how colonial modernity itself promoted and strengthened certain aspects of tradition, in this case the ideology of caste, within the public space that affected all Indians, although differentially. It is an issue that has not been seriously addressed until now, at least as far as Bengal is concerned. And it is important, because the caste movements of the early twentieth century stood at an intersection between tradition and modernity, selectively appropriating elements of both in order to facilitate their empowerment and articulate their collective identities. There was no uniform rejection of the modernist *bhadralok* project of brotherhood, nor did such ideas appeal only to a lower caste 'counter-elite'. As Sumit Sarkar has argued in his recent book *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, the lower castes 'were quite often oppositional, but hardly ever autonomous in the sense of being free from high-caste religious, social and historical assumptions.'[78] And these high caste religious assumptions that sustained the Indian caste system did not certainly offer an indigenous alternative of harmonious social order to an oppressive and exploitative colonial modernity. This 'difference' that survived was also based on asymmetric relations of power, which adjusted and adapted well to the new paradigm of modernity. In other words, the relationship between caste and modernity is much more complex than has been allowed in the existing historical literature on Bengal.

IV

This brings us to the nature of caste identity and here Sumit Sarkar has made another important statement that needs to be explored further. 'Caste identity, after all,' he states, 'is not a natural, given, unchanging, or hermetically sealed entity—any more than class.'[79] Here two issues are important: neither a caste represented a homogeneous group with a given identity, nor its relations with other castes

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[77] Anindita Ghosh, 'Revisiting the "Bengal Renaissance": Literary Bengali and Low-Life Print in Colonial Calcutta', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 October 2002.

[78] Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (New Delhi: 2002), pp. 78–79.

[79] S. Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 390.

and with the Hindu society in general ever remained static. These two factors of differentiation and transience need to be taken into consideration while looking at any caste movement or its relationship with other identities and agitations. It is in the recognition of these two features and in the interrogation of the essentialism of caste that we may say a new trend in caste studies is emerging.

Contrary to common assumptions, castes in colonial India were often very differentiated and caste movements resulted usually from convergence of various streams of consciousness, ambition for social climbing as well as protest, reflecting the plurality of the group. All these various sections within a 'caste' had, however, one common aspiration, that of reworking the relations of power in society and polity. In their differing perceptions, they hoped to achieve this through divergent means, which ranged from constitutional agitation to direct action, sometimes even violent action. Such a convergence of differing mentalities led to the formation and articulation of a unified caste identity at a given point in history. But this did not preclude the possibility of divergence or fissuring of the community at a subsequent stage. Sumit Sarkar has alerted us to the need of introducing class as an analytical category into any discussion of caste, for it is on class lines that caste identities often get fractured.[80] And not just class, caste identity indeed co-existed with several other competing identities, such as religious and national identities. As Nicholas Dirks states: 'Caste…was just one category among many others, one way of organising and representing identity.'[81] At a particular historical conjuncture any one of these might take precedence over others as a focal point for political mobilisation; but this did not mean that other identities were completely displaced or erased and would not be articulated at another juncture. It is this transient and conjunctural nature of identity and complex trajectories of caste movements, rather than their assumed homogeneity and unilinear progress, which needs to be focused on.

For Bengal, these realities of differentiation and transience have been recognised in Swaraj Basu's recent book on the Rajbansis;[82] my own case study on the Namasudras has also tried to develop this model. In this context the Namasudras represented an important case, as they constituted the second largest Hindu caste in colonial

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[80] S. Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, chapters 2 and 3.
[81] Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 13.
[82] S. Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement*.

Bengal and the largest group among the Hindu agriculturists in its eastern districts. These loosely organised people, who lived in varying material conditions and enjoyed differentiated ranks in different parts of the province, constructed through a protest movement in the late nineteenth century, a single caste identity and demanded recognition of their new status. More or less consistently they remained alienated from nationalist politics till about the end of the 1930s; they opposed Gandhian nationalism and suspected his reformist remedy for untouchability. But then, around the time of the transfer of power and Partition, their movement gradually disintegrated and merged into the other dominant political streams in the country, represented by such organisations as the Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Kisan Sabhas.[83] Indeed, all other Scheduled Caste movements in Bengal experienced the same fissiparous tendencies towards the end of the colonial era: while the educated and more prosperous leaders preferred to join the Congress, the peasants either got involved in the Hindu Mahasabha campaign for the partition of the province and the creation of a greater Hindu homeland, or alternatively, joined the Tebhaga movement under communist leadership.[84]

In this situation, therefore, apparently conflicting identities woven around caste, class, religion or nation, were locked in a complex cobweb of interrelationship. Any theory of the *essential* 'otherness' of dalit identity[85] would not really help us understand this paradigm. This is not to suggest that the putative corporate status of caste was

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[83] S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*.

[84] For a general discussion on the Scheduled Caste movements in the 1940s, see, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal, 1937–47', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XXXI, no. 3, 1994, pp. 349–91. The pre-Partition Hindu mobilisation of the Scheduled Castes has been discussed in Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932–1947* (Cambridge: 1995), pp. 191–203. A small section of the Depressed Classes opposed the Hindu Mahasabha plan for Partition, for details see, Masayuki Usuda, 'Pushed towards the Partition: Jogendranath Mandal and the Constrained Namasudra Movement', in H. Kotani (ed.), *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed* (New Delhi: 1997). The Scheduled Caste participation in the Tebhaga movement has been discussed in Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggle in Bengal 1930–1950* (Calcutta: 1988), pp. 113–65, 255–69.

[85] See for example, Kancha Ilaih, 'Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative', in S. Amin and D. Chakrabarty (eds), *Subaltern Studies IX*: *Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: 1996).

unreal or that the dalit did not face discrimination in Bengal. All the existing studies indicate the contrary. Indeed, beyond the details of articulate protest movements, we know very little about the day-to-day ontological realities of the 'dalit–bahujan' experience in Bengal, particularly during those so-called tranquil moments marked by the absence of overt conflict. This is in fact a vast area waiting for future researchers, who would be required to go beyond archival sources, literary evidence or caste association journals, and move into the realm of anthropology to explore the life experiences at the grassroots level and study the significance of the agency of the masses in interrogating the relations of power in orthodox Hindu society, their 'everyday forms of resistance' to domination and exploitation.[86]

However, this resistance notwithstanding, the existing historical evidence also suggests that the putative identity of caste has never been always disharmonic or combative. Accommodation and co-existence—if not integration—were neither uncommon nor unnatural; but this happened at different levels and in different ways. Caste identity often got fractured along class lines, and thus became disorientated and transfigured in its political articulation, which implied that it was historical and contextual, rather than timeless. If conflict was real, collaboration and co-operation at different planes were true as well; the two sets of relationships were probably braided very closely together in the quotidian social existence of the Bengali Hindus. The Namasudras' concern for the cow as a symbol of Hindu honour in Bangladesh in the 1950s (then East Pakistan, of course),[87] or the Scheduled Caste support for the left parties in present day West Bengal, indicate the continuation of these trends in our own times. In the latter case, Partha Chatterjee has argued that despite this support, the state and those who wanted to control state power may still appear as 'external entities' in peasant consciousness.[88] However, as far as empirical research is concerned, what the peasants actually thought about the state is still a relatively hazy zone and therefore, a matter of academic conjecture. One may perhaps also argue in a different way: the peasants forget neither their class interests, nor

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[86] This is what James C. Scott would call the weapons of the weak with a hidden transcript for resistance. See his *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: 1985).

[87] Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict* (New Delhi: 1994).

[88] Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Politics in West Bengal', in his *The Present History of West Bengal* (New Delhi: 1997), p. 86.

their caste identity and may not be totally ignorant of the broader structures of power, particularly in a Panchayati Raj where they can use it for their own empowerment.[89]

The peasants' articulation of their identity and their responses to the political environment, are contextual, not universal, and theirs is a mental world where, as it appears from what is still very insufficient empirical information, the secular and the sacred are both present and intertwined. In a particular historical context, the dalit may identify themselves with Hindu honour and its sacred insignia; in another, they may fight the protagonists of Hindu orthodoxy. A caste movement may get fractured along class lines and follow different trajectories of political action; yet this fissure may not threaten the putative status of that caste in other areas of social existence. Similarly, the articulation of fragmenting identities such as caste need not disprove the existence of broader configurations, such as the nation. Sumit Sarkar has warned us against 'eclectic approaches',[90] which assume that caste, religion, nation and class are all of equal value or importance as categories for expressing identity. The purpose of the present historiographical exercise is not to debate the relative importance of and relationship between such categories. We may only highlight here the necessity of interrogating the essentialism of caste, viewed both from above as well as from below. It may be suggested that community boundaries, as they figure in the political space of contestable power, are imagined within certain historical contexts, which privilege one or the other of those categories without displacing the rest and therefore, with a shift in that context, such boundaries can also be de-imagined and re-imagined. As Andre Beteille puts it: 'It is not enough to know that boundaries exist between groups, one must also examine the situations under which some boundaries are ignored and others become significant.'[91] Studies on caste, power and politics in Bengal, instead of following stereotypical models of homogeneity and linearity, should focus on the conjunctural nature of social identities, that is, on the complex interplay between identities and their contexts, the changing meanings of boundaries and their markers, as well as the subtle interactions between the ideologies of protest and ambitions for power.

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[89] For a recent case study on dalit participation in panchayat politics in West Bengal, see Sukanta Bhattacharya, 'Caste, Class and Politics in West Bengal: Case Study of a Village in Burdwan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 January 2003.
[90] Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, pp. 79–80.
[91] Beteille, *Society and Politics in India*, p. 56.

V

In this book we will revisit some of the issues mentioned above in our historiographical survey, but this rethinking will take place around a central question, that of how the caste system withstood resistance from below and adjusted itself to colonial modernity. By using empirical data from Bengal, this book will seek to explore how Hindu caste society sought to maintain its cultural hegemony and structural cohesion by frustrating reformist endeavours, by co-opting challenges by the untouchables and by marginalising dissidence during the colonial period. Starting with case studies of early cultural encounters between 'high' Brahmanical tradition and the more egalitarian 'popular' religious cults of the lower castes, it will end with an examination of the Hindu 'Partition' campaign, which tended to appropriate dalit autonomous politics and made Hinduism the foundation of an emergent Indian national identity.

The first chapter of this book sets this discussion in context by unraveling the power structure of Hindu caste society in pre-colonial and colonial Bengal, by showing that neither the orthodox nor the reformist discourses ever contested the notion of hierarchy, which was the foundational principle of the caste system. It argues that the hegemony of the higher castes was thus never properly challenged by what we call colonial modernity, and that this hegemony was maintained by both ideology and the imperatives of structure, or in other words, both by consent and coercion. The second chapter argues that this hegemony did not foreclose the space for contestation and this was evident in the emergence of various popular religious sects among the dalit, which contested the totalising dominance of dharma. But since this discourse of protest was constructed within the cultural context of domination, these sects too soon began to conform and reproduce the notions of hierarchy or were marginalised in course of time.

The next two chapters discuss the relationship between caste and gender. The third chapter focuses on the particular modernist reform movement to introduce widow remarriage in the mid-nineteenth century and shows how it failed in Bengal because of a popular fear of 'losing caste'. And not just that the reform failed, by the beginning of the twentieth century the prohibition on widow remarriage became more widespread among the dalit and backward castes as a result of Sanskritisation—a process through which the Brahmanical culture was universalised. The fourth further elaborates on this issue and shows the existence of an inverse relationship between

social mobility and status of women among the dalit and backward castes. Through 'Sanskritisation' and 'Westernisation' these castes reproduced among themselves the Brahmanical models of gender inequality.

Finally, the fifth and last chapter questions the autonomy of dalit political identity. It shows that in 1947 when the Hindu Mahasabha launched a campaign for the partition of Bengal and the creation of a Hindu homeland in West Bengal, the dalit of the eastern and northern districts readily joined in. This chapter shows how Hindu nationalism since the 1920s devised a strategy to incorporate the dalit groups into its project of Hindu solidarity, and how as a result, the putative 'Otherness' of the dalit tended to recede before the more prominently projected 'Otherness' of the Muslims. This book thus seeks to raise questions about the assumption of an *essential* mental disjuncture between the dalit and backward castes on the one end and Hindu society on the other. Without minimising the historical importance of their protests, the book asks the other often avoided question as to why in the end such contestation could not subvert the hegemony of the Brahmanical culture, which set limits to the imagination of the dalit and backward castes. It argues that these groups could imagine their identity or communicate their notions of status only through the available cultural symbols defined within, and not outside, the discursive space of Hinduism. Hindu nationalism, therefore, could find ways and means of mobilizing them in support of its political campaigns during the critical Partition days and after. However, this incorporation took place within the oppressive hierarchical social structure of the caste system, which thus survived by co-opting and appropriating challenges from below. The book intends to speak only for Bengal, and does not aspire to generalise for the whole of India, despite occasional references to the all-India situation. But it also seeks to explode the general myth that Bengal is an exception to the subcontinental pattern, as far as caste discrimination and exclusion are concerned, notwithstanding significant differences in form and degree.

Three of the five chapters in this book were published earlier in various forms, and therefore, all the chapters appear here as independent essays. The first chapter was initially published in *Prachya* (the journal of the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta), and incorporates some parts that first appeared as 'Symposium Paper 1' of the Indian History Congress in 1992. The third chapter was published as an article in Bharati Ray (ed.), *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women* (New

Delhi: 1995); and the fifth appeared as an essay in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato (eds), *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation Building in South Asia* (New Delhi: 2001). Parts of the introduction appeared as a historiographical essay in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bengal: Rethinking History, Essays in Historiography* (New Delhi: 2001). However, these earlier essays have been substantially revised and expanded. And some of my ideas and arguments have also changed significantly between their first appearance as articles and their present reincarnation as chapters in a book. A discerning reader will also find that I have drawn extensively from my two earlier books on the caste system in Bengal. This is simply because the ideas and arguments I present here have been built on my earlier observations on this rather complex phenomenon.

1

Caste and Power

Competing Discourses in Colonial Bengal

I

Religious and caste strife, which in the past years has almost become almost routine in India's public life, poses the most serious threat to her fragile state of national integration. The Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid issue and the Mandal Commission Report have raised serious questions about the secular nature of India's society and her polity. They have also seriously challenged a particular concept of Indian modernity that supposedly strived to exclude the religious question from the public space and to relocate it in the private. Questions have been raised about the nature of the Indian nation, which claims to speak for everyone, but the processes of construction of which are supposed to have involved a series of exclusions, closures and erasures. So when that national identity is celebrated by the post-colonial state, it underscores at once the stifling of several voices and the marginalisation of certain identities—such as non-Brahman, dalit and gender identities—'the Other of the nation', as M. S. S. Pandian describes them.[1] But this '"other" is never outside or beyond us;' writes Homi Bhabha; 'it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, … as we speak most intimately and indigenously "between

[1] M. S. S. Pandian, '"Nation" from Its Margins: Notes on E. V. Ramaswamy's "Impossible" Nation', Rajeev Bhargava, Amiya Kumar Bagchi and R. Sudarshan (eds), *Multiculturism, Liberalism and Democracy* (New Delhi: 1999), p. 287.

ourselves"'.[2] In this context comes Kancha Ilaih's bold and emotive statement of dalit otherness, *Why I am not a Hindu*[3]—a book, which has been compared by some with Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.[4] Nowhere does the alienation of the dalit–bahujan *samaj* from the post-colonial nation and also from its dominant Hindu right wing politics come through more clearly than in this text.

This situation raises some important questions about politics and statecraft in post-colonial India. Religious (in this case Hindu) and caste (backward and dalit) identities are in this context often visualised as situated in oppositional relationships, caste representing a contradiction that has the potential to wreck the emerging Hindu solidarity. Thus, when the Sangh Parivar pretended to speak for the entire Hindu community, the Mandal Commission report, as Amrita Basu alleges, was given publicity and officially adopted to divide the Hindu political vote bank in electoral politics.[5] The Mandir–Mandal dichotomy, as Sumit Sarkar argues, shows that the construction of a homogenised Hindutva is an effort to counter lower caste aspirations to political power.[6] This lower caste self-assertion, it is expected, can provide a basis for modernisation and a struggle against communalism and hierarchical order in contemporary Indian society. The Uttar Pradesh (hereafter UP) election in 1993, in which the forward march of Hindu fundamentalism was temporarily stalled by an alliance of the dalit and the 'Other Backward Classes', is cited as an indication of that possibility.[7]

The subsequent formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party government in UP with the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party and a repeat performance of this political manoeuvering in 2002 would certainly pose difficult analytical problems to all those observers mentioned above. Such political alignments can either be denigrated

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[2] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Introduction: Narrating the Nation', in H. K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London, New York: 1990), p. 4.

[3] Kancha Ilaih, *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: 1996).

[4] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London, New York: 1998), p. 199.

[5] Amrita Basu, 'Mass Movement or Elite Conspiracy? The Puzzle of Hindu Nationalism', in D. Ludden (ed.), *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India* (New Delhi: 1996).

[6] Sumit Sarkar, 'Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva', in Ludden, *Making India Hindu.*

[7] R. Kothari, 'Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 June 1994; P. C. Upadhyay, 'The Politics of Indian Secularism', *Modern Asian Studies,* vol. 26, Part 4, October 1992.

as opportunism or may be explained as 'a compulsion of electoral politics'.[8] Gail Omvedt describes this situation as 'genuine assertion and … a step forward', but it stops short of being transformatory, thus allowing the Hindutva wave to take over.[9] It may also be explained in terms of the dalit's refusal to be bound by the secular–communal binary, which has been created, as Kancha Ilaih argues, to obfuscate the process of Mandalisation that promised the empowerment of the dalit.[10] Aditya Nigam has taken this argument a step further by asserting that this rejection of the secular–communal binary emanated from the dalit's rejection of the very discourse of modernisation, which had created it. Historically, this rejection is traced back to their jettisoning the idea of abstract citizenship and embracing the concept of community-based proportional representation.[11] One might argue, however, that the concept of separate representation should not be extracted from its context or separated from its history of production; it was in itself a political artifact of colonial modernity, which the dalit political elite appropriated and deployed as a tool of liberation.

It is difficult to imagine organised dalit politics as anti-modernist, given the enormous amount of faith it had reposed in the colonial state and its legal and political structures and the emotional investment it had made in colonial modernisation as an emancipatory influence that could break the shackles of tradition. 'Ambedkar was an unalloyed modernist', writes Partha Chatterjee. 'He believed in science, history, rationality, secularism and above all in the modern state as the site for the actualisation of human reason.'[12] The very acceptance by the dalit of the principle of reservation as enshrined in the Indian Constitution is tantamount to an acceptance of the Constitution itself that remains the fundamental document of the Indian nation state, the most important political structure created by the discourse of modernisation. And the Constitution guarantees this special privilege to the dalit as long as they remain Hindu. The

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[8] Ghanshyam Shah, 'Introduction: Dalit Politics', in G. Shah (ed.), *Dalit Identity and Politics* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: 2001), p. 35.

[9] Gail Omvedt, 'Ambedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India', in G. Shah, *Dalit Identity and Politics*, pp. 156–57.

[10] Kancha Ilaih, 'Towards the *Dalit*isation of the Nation', in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State* (New Delhi: 1998), pp. 283, 285.

[11] Aditya Nigam, 'Secularism, Modernity, Nation: Epistemology of the Dalit Critique', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 November 2000, pp. 4256–68.

[12] Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation in Heterogeneous Time', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2001, p. 403.

Scheduled Caste Order of 1950 says: 'No person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste.'[13] However fallacious this policy may be, its fundamentals remain unchanged even today and so the enjoyment of the privileges of affirmative action—which creates the expectation of dalit empowerment through the process of Mandalisation–remains conditional upon the acceptance of the teleological taxonomy of the Indian nation state.

M. S. S. Pandian's intervention in this debate, however, seems to be more incisive. The dalit, he argues, rejected the nationalist construction of modernity that tended to take away the 'caste question' from the public space and relocate it in the private. But critiquing the nationalist conception of modernity is not tantamount to the jettisoning of modernity *per se*. Indeed, both Ambedkar and Periyar 'courted the modern for the mobilisation of lower caste'. But they did not just accept modernity, they also criticised it for not delivering the promised benefits. And where the post-colonial dalit differ from the nationalist perspective of secular modernity is in recovering the 'caste question' from the private sphere and in situating it boldly in public debate.[14] It is perhaps in this respect that dalit politics is homologous to Hindutva, which has unambiguously repositioned religion in the public space. But it does not mean that the dalit reject the secular–communal binary. It is important to remember that the dalit do not vote for the BJP;[15] it is the dalit political organisations that seek coalition with it. Therefore, we have to look for other explanations for the enigma involved in the BSP–BJP alliance, however mulishly contrived it may be.

Shortlived on the first occasion and thorny on the second, this political alliance suggests—in all its appearances—that lower caste political aspirations, instead of wrecking Hindu solidarity, can be contained and appropriated into the structure of Hindu nationalist politics. To understand this situation we have to raise a different set of questions. Was this alliance, so far as the dalit were concerned, an act of discretion or compulsion? If we start from Gail Omvedt's position that there is a palpable lack of a transformatory ideology in their movement,[16] can they realistically hope to share power

[13] 'Staying a Dalit Forever?', *The Statesman*, 6 December 1999.

[14] M. S. S. Pandian, 'One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 May 2002.

[15] Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Hindu Nationalism and Democracy', in N. G. Jayal (ed.), *Democracy in India* (New Delhi: 2001), p. 529.

[16] Omvedt, 'Ambedkar and After', p. 157.

within the existing structures of the Indian state except through coalition with the dominant power elites of the Hindu nation—either secular–liberal or religious–majoritarian? In order to answer such questions, we will have to revisit the relationship between religion, caste and politics in Indian society. In this chapter we will focus on the relevance of caste issues to the notions of Hindu solidarity and to the politics associated with it. We will see how the basic power structure of Hindu society rested on the ideologies of caste, and how challenges to caste orientated relations of power were confronted and overpowered during the colonial period.

The relationship between religion and politics has been a major issue of debate in historical and sociological writings on India, and the location of caste within that discursive field has been even more contentious. We have defined caste (see Introduction), by borrowing an expression from Dirks, as a 'cultural construction of power',[17] incorporating both it's spiritual and temporal representations. By stretching that definition a little further, it can be argued that since it was a cultural construct, it was a protean concept that tended to reflect the continually changing power relations in Indian society, even though colonial rule changed the context within which these power relations were embedded. This was a social situation where religion and politics were inextricably intertwined, neither being encompassed nor subordinated by the other. Here the Raja and the Brahman pundit were locked in a relationship of mutual co-operation and interdependence to maintain their hegemony and contain disruptions to the fabric of Hindu society. This was hardly a situation of pre-colonial innocence destroyed by the normalising impact of Western modernity. Colonial modernity, itself, had to alter to leave enough space to accommodate the hegemonic authority of a traditional power elite and its ethico-cultural system. Recent post-colonial studies on the subject of Indian modernity and its negotiation with cultural difference have not properly addressed the caste question, although it was in this symbolic space that the persistence of Indian 'difference' was so perceptibly obvious.[18] And it was a 'difference' that was not the harmonious and morally justifiable 'Other' of an authoritarian colonial modernity, but a culture that also rested on oppressive and asymmetric relations of power.

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[17] Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: 1987), p. 5.

[18] See for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, Oxford: 2000).

In the changing social scenario of colonial India, status discrepancies, which had the most perilous potential of creating imbalances in Hindu society, could be resolved through an assertion of hegemonic power by the dominant castes, who defended their position by co-opting upwardly mobile groups into the existing power structure. Social protests, that attempted to subvert these power relations, and thus more seriously threatened to breach the solidarity of Hindu society, were, on the other hand, gradually marginalised. In an age when 'Hindu' identity had assumed immense political significance vis-à-vis it's Others—the British and the Muslims—maintaining in-house solidarity was of course an important political project. Within Hindu society there was space for transcending the boundaries of caste; but this transcendence occurred within its basic power structure, where the hegemony of the upper castes was sustained by factors both sacred and secular. In other words, this hegemony was maintained both through ideology and the imperatives of structure—both through consent and coercion.

Such a formulation does not take away the possibility of protest; indeed, no hegemony is ever so complete that it leaves no space for autonomy and resistance. But this dissent is also contained through a process of co-optation, appropriation and marginalisation. In this chapter we shall discuss how Hindu society during the colonial period recognised changes in the power structure, but sought to maintain its unity by co-opting challenges and by marginalising dissidence. We will use empirical evidence from colonial Bengal; but we believe parallels will not be difficult to find from other parts of India and from other periods as well. But a caveat may be added here. There will also be evidence to the contrary—of successful and effective contestation of and resistance to hegemony, particularly by the non-Brahmans and the dalit.[19] That evidence will in itself constitute another revision of the existing theoretical wisdom—that we cannot

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[19] Indeed, Christophe Jaffrelot has argued that the non-Brahmans and the dalit in west and south India, in contrast to their counterparts in the north, could successfully construct their 'emancipatory identity' based on an 'alternative egalitarian sub-culture'. This happened as a result of a process of 'ethnicization' that asserted their pre-Aryan and Buddhist identity and thus helped them to get out of the 'mind-set' and 'belief system' of caste. Although this formulation appears to be a very broad generalisation, it is difficult to deny that there is evidently some truth in it. See, Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Sanskritization vs. Ethnicization in India: Changing Identities and Caste Politics before Mandal', *Asian Survey*, vol. XL, no. 5, September–October 2000, pp. 756–66.

homogenise the history of these oppressed groups. Their lived experiences, the forms of their struggle, the nature of their subjectivity and the intensity of their voices varied from region to region, from period to period and even within the same geographical area and time space. To put it in a different way, if we remember the powerful argument put forward by Dipankar Gupta that 'the rules of caste is only obeyed when it is accompanied by the rule of power',[20] then we have to admit that this power structure varied widely between regions and there were multiple hierarchies in existence. It is therefore appropriate that we recognise that there can be multiple histories of caste relations in colonial and post-colonial India; we will be narrating here only one of them. And then again, it is not an unruffled linear narrative of hegemony, but a story that has to negotiate frequently with counter-narratives of contestation and protest.

II

In pre-colonial Bengal, material prosperity, political power and higher ritual rank usually went together.[21] Indeed, the linkages between caste, class and power, as Niharranjan Ray has shown,[22] were being established in Bengal since the Gupta period (c. 4th–6th century A.D.). As a settled agricultural economy developed, groups involved in social production, providing physical labour or doing menial jobs, began to lose in ritual status vis-à-vis the intelligentsia: the priests, the clerks and the physicians. The hegemony of this Brahmanical ideology, as Kunal Chakrabarti has argued, rapidly spread in Bengal during the post-Gupta period, through the active patronage of the Sena-Barman kings, who privileged the position of the Brahmans with generous land grants and enforced the strict rules of *varnashram dharma*.[23] The occupational division of caste prevented the lower castes from owning land. As a result, they constituted in pre-British India 'a large rural proletariat'[24] who, besides following

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[20] Dipankar Gupta, *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society* (New Delhi: 2000), p. 67.
[21] Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1981), pp. 19–26.
[22] Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas, Adi Parba*, third edn, (Calcutta: 1980), pp. 324–25.
[23] Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (New Delhi: 2001), pp. 113–14.
[24] Irfan Habib, 'The Social Distribution of Landed Property in Pre-British India', *Enquiry*, n.s., vol. II, no. 3, Winter 1965, p. 73.

their prescribed menial professions, were only supposed to work on the land owned by the higher or middle orders of the caste hierarchy. The doctrine of caste thus appears to be an ideological tool to legitimise a system of surplus extraction which prescribed fixed roles for everybody, but also provided minimum social security for all, if they followed their own hereditary calling.

This does not mean however that pre-colonial society became absolutely rigid or immobile. In 1798 Colebrook observed that—'Every profession with few exceptions, is open to every description of person.'[25] This occupational mobility and differentiation are believed to have increased further under colonial rule, which replaced the customary production relationship with contract and thus is supposed to have disengaged caste from the economic system. Land became a marketable commodity, career was thrown open to talent and as a result, competition was introduced in a society that was previously believed to have been non-competitive. Frequent transfer of landed rights as well as new opportunities in trade and the professions led to a greater diffusion of wealth across caste lines, and a growing urban industrial culture seemed to threaten the traditional social milieu so seriously that many individuals, ranging from the Brahmo social reformer Shibnath Shastri[26] in the late nineteenth century, to the Marxist scholar R. P. Dutt[27] in the twentieth, shared the expectation that the caste system would automatically wither away under the pressures of modernisation.

But this anticipated collapse never occurred, as the pressures of the modernising process never really threatened the foundational pillars of the traditional social structure. There had been a number of well known cases of social mobility in Bengal, dating from the seventeenth century onwards, but on the whole this occupational mobility and differentiation had been extremely limited. Reclamation of forestlands, for example, had provided the pastoral Gops (Sadgops) in southwestern Bengal,[28] the tribal Bhumij families in south Purulia and the adjacent areas of Singhbhum[29] and the Chaasi Kaibarttas (Mahishyas) in eastern and southern Midnapur, with an opportunity

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[25] Quoted in G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India* (Bombay: 1957), p. 17.
[26] Shibnath Shastri, *Jatibhed* (1884), edited by Dilip Kumar Biswas (Calcutta: 1963), p. 30.
[27] R. P. Dutt, *India To-day* (1949, reprint, Calcutta: 1979), p. 610.
[28] See, H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*.
[29] Surojit Sinha, 'Bhumij-Kshatriya Social Movement in South Manbhum', *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology*, vol. 8, no. 2, July 1959.

for mobility.[30] Trade and moneylending, on the other hand, became sources of mobility for the Tilis,[31] Subarnabaniks, Gandhabaniks and Tambulibaniks,[32] though in many cases profit from business was invested in purchasing landed rights. But such mobility was fairly restricted and only rarely was there any movement from the bottom up.

If the census statistics can be trusted as general indicators of certain broad social trends, though not as faithful reflections of the actual social situation,[33] then even in the early twentieth century (1901–31), in spite of the much talked of occupational mobility, we would find sizeable sections of the members of each caste still engaged in what was known to be their hereditary caste occupations. In Bengali, agrarian society, within the structure of the dichotomous vertical relationship between the 'rent-receivers' and the 'rent-payers' (census categories once again), we find an overwhelmingly larger representation of the higher (Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya) and some middle ranking (Nabasakh and *jalacharaniya)* castes in the upper stratum and a relatively greater concentration of the unclean and untouchable (*jalavyavahariya* or *ajalchal* and *antyaja*) castes at the bottom. The higher castes gradually extended their predominance to the field of education and consequently to the modern sectors of white-collar and industrial employment. And so far as trade was concerned, here also the members of the higher and the middle ranking castes, who already had some surplus in their hands, could and did take advantage of the new opportunities thrown up by the foreign trading companies.[34] In other words, in the colonial period there had been very limited changes in the material context of caste, and the groups that were socially mobile could be gradually co-opted into the power structure of Hindu caste society without disrupting its fundamentals.

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[30] Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Congress Movements in the Villages of Eastern Midnapore, 1921–1931', in Mare Gaborieau and Alice Thorner (eds), *Asie Du Sud: Traditions et Changement* (Paris: 1979); also 'Congress in Southwestern Bengal: The Anti-Union Board Movement in Eastern Midnapur, 1921', in Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert (eds), *Congress and Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi: 1988).

[31] H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*.

[32] See, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872–1937* (Calcutta: 1991).

[33] See, Frank F. Conlon, 'The Census of India as a Source for the Historical Study of Religion and Caste', in N. Gerald Barrier (ed.), *The Census in British India: New Perspectives* (New Delhi: 1981).

[34] See, S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*.

It is, therefore, necessary to look at the power structure of Hindu society and its cultural manifestations. The caste system prescribed for each group in society, according to its rank, certain codes of conduct or *jati dharma*, which every individual had to perform in real life. According to the scriptural discourse on caste, such conduct encoded the attributes of bodily substance, as well as the occupational, worship and territorial substance of a *jati*, or in other words covered the entire gamut of religious and secular behaviour of a *jati* and therefore signalled its ritual as well as social rank.[35] Any deviation from such codes of behaviour would lead to a fall from the ascribed rank, which implied the denial of all sorts of social interaction with the local community, as well as of essential social services. Even the peripheral groups, whom Alfred Lyall had once described as 'the original non-Aryan or casteless tribes', who at one time dwelled at the margins of the Hindu social space, but were gradually entering the fold of Hinduism, also conformed to this behavioural pattern, as Herbert Risley found in the Bengal of the mid-1880s.[36] This acculturation of the lower orders and the general cultural conformism in society were certainly not acts of volition. In order to gain access to Hindu society and to remain a member of this community, it was necessary to accept its behavioural norms. These norms were essentially based on hierarchical ethics that sanctified the social preeminence of the Brahmans who, because of their monopoly of scriptural knowledge, were believed to have been the chief arbiters of the normative standards of collective as well as individual social behaviour of the Hindus. By the end of the twelfth century, as Kunal Chakrabarti has argued, the triumph of Brahmanism at an ideological level was complete. As the Bengal Puranas (composed between the eighth and thirteenth centuries A.D.) depict, this happened through a cultural process that appropriated a variety of local traditions and symbols into the system of Vedic worship and imputed new shared meanings into them. Brahmanism thus allowed for a significant amount of flexibility and syncretism, but the *varnashram dharma* and the primacy of the Brahmans remained the foundational principles of social order. The *smriti* literature composed in this period prescribed the norms of life cycle rituals for all the Bengali Hindus,

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[35] Ronald Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture* (New Delhi: 1976), pp. 18–22.

[36] H. H. Risley, 'On the Application of Dr. Topinard's Anthropometric System to the Castes and Tribes of Bengal', 8 March 1886, Govt. of Bengal, Financial (Miscellaneous) Proceedings, March 1887, pp. 83–85, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

and this normative system remained the referral point for the later *smritikaras*. Thus by the end of the twelfth century, as Chakrabarti observes, 'what was once the world-view of a privileged social group became co-extensive with almost entire cultural sphere of Bengal.'[37]

But the Brahmanic fiat would hardly mean anything unless backed by sufficient power. The maintenance of social discipline and the enforcement of scriptural prescriptions therefore depended on an elaborate power structure that controlled the entire range of social relations in Bengali Hindu society. In the early medieval period, the Bengal Puranas prescribed that the role of the Rajas would be to maintain the discipline of the *varna* division of labour according to the advice of learned Brahmans, patronise them with generous land grants and punish the violators of discipline with awe-inspiring strictness, so that no one ever dared to break the normative system of Brahmanism. As the inscriptional evidence suggests, the Rajas acted exactly in accordance with the Puranic prescriptions.[38] What needs to be emphasised here is the centrality of the king in the maintenance of social order and his relationship with the Brahman. As Ronald Inden has shown, the king had the 'coercive power (*danda*)', which was instrumental in maintaining social order. But the source of ultimate power was supposed to be Vedic worship, which could only be accessed through the mediation of the Brahman. The king could therefore only work 'in conjunction with the Brahmans'. With the fall of the Senas and the demise of the political power of Gauda, there was a crisis in this organisation of political power of Brahmanism. But it was resolved through the evolution of a new institution of subcaste council or *samaja*, which began to regulate the rules of marriage and from them the local chiefs, in the absence of the more powerful regional rulers, derived legitimacy for the exercise of their power and the enforcement of discipline.[39] In Mughal Bengal, as the evidence of the *Mangalakavyas* (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries A.D.) indicates, the territorial chiefs or Rajas and below them the zamindars, with minimum interference from the central Mughal state (as it was a *nasaq* area),[40] ruled over the *samajas* which included the hierarchy of castes living within the territory. Each caste had a council, which

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[37] K. Chakrabarti, *Religious Process,* pp. 15–17, 32–33, 113–32; the quotation is from p. 17.

[38] *Ibid.*, 127–28.

[39] Inden, *Marriage and Rank*, pp. 52–53, 77.

[40] In contrast to *zabt* areas, where the Mughal state interfered to survey land and estimate land revenue, in the *nasaq* areas the central state granted local autonomy in return for regular payment of annual *peshkash*.

adjudicated in caste and family disputes. The Raja was the head of his own caste council, and he presided over all the other caste councils in his chiefdom. He provided protection to his subjects, maintained law and order, arranged for the colonisation of new lands, patronised the goods and services of the artisan and the service castes, settled caste and other disputes and thus enforced the appropriate codes of social and moral behaviour.[41] This medieval system of social control possibly continued into the early British period, as is indicated in some of the observations of the early twentieth century. A social observer in Bengal noted in 1910:

> Previously some Brahman rajas, like the Raja of Nadia, the Raja of Tahirpur, the Raja of Natore or the Raja of Susung, exerted immense influence on the Bengali Hindu Society. The rules which they prescribed, in consultation with the chief pundits of the country, regarding ritual and social behaviour were obeyed by everybody.[42]

What is more important, when the non-Brahmans acquired land and consequently political power, such as the locally influential Sadgop Rajas of Gopbhum, Karnargarh, Narayangarh and Balarampur,[43] the Bhumij Kshatriya zamindars of Barabhum and Baghmundi, the Taraf Sardar of Satrakhani[44] or the Koch Rajas of north Bengal,[45] their ritual status also improved and they too became the upholders of Brahmanism and its hierarchical caste rules. As they patronised the Brahmans with liberal land grants and temple building, the latter also legitimised their new status by offering ritual services, thereby elevating their caste rank. This Raja–pundit nexus, with the former enjoying monopoly over economic and political power and the latter monopoly over scriptural knowledge and exclusive access to Vedic worship, thus continued to control popular culture and maintain the integrity and solidarity of caste society in medieval and early colonial Bengal.

The ideological hegemony of the caste system over Bengali society continued uninterrupted into the nineteenth century, as the colonial power and its modernising project, in spite of their much-discussed

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[41] Ronald Inden, 'The Hindu Chiefdom in Middle Bengali Literature', in Edward C. Dimock Jr. (ed.), *Bengal: Literature and History* (East Lansing, Michigan: 1967).

[42] Durga Chandra Sanyal, *Banglar Samajik Itihas* (Calcutta: 1317 B.S.), p. 450.

[43] See H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal.*

[44] S. Sinha, 'Bhumij-Kshatriya Social Movement in South Manbhum'.

[45] S. Taniguchi, '*Uttarbanga o Asamer Rajbansi sampraday ebang bhumibyabasthar paribartansil kathamo*', in S. Bandyopadhyay and A. Dasgupta (eds), *Jati, Barna O Bangali Samaj* (Calcutta: 1998).

totalising influence, failed to completely erase the space for indigenous cultural autonomy. Officially, of course, the new state did not recognise the distinction of caste; but its early non-interventionist policies only reinforced the position of the caste elites, and it was through them that the new regime sought to establish its control over the indigenous society.[46] For a time its customs and practices were not disturbed and therefore, for all private matters, marriage, inheritance, succession etc., the Hindus were governed by the Hindu laws and this meant the *dharmashastra*, or the corpus of laws framed and now interpreted by the Brahman pundits for the understanding of the European judges. But the colonial state underestimated the plurality and complexity of the Hindu legal tradition and was bewildered as the pundits gave divergent interpretations of the various schools of *dharmashastra* and sometimes their opinions on the same law varied widely from case to case. Warren Hastings therefore appointed a committee of 11 pundits who compiled a digest of Hindu laws in 1775, known as the *Vivadarnava-bhanjana* (breakwater to the ocean of litigation) and it was translated into English by N. B. Halhed in 1776.[47] This had the effect of standardising civil laws for all the Hindus, and prescribing the rules set by the Brahmans as ideals for the rest of society. As *Sambad Prabhakar* put it on 30 June 1887: 'The Brahmin caste occupies the highest position and all laws and ordinances have been formed with special reference to that. All the other castes conduct themselves after the fashion of the Brahminical castes.'[48]

The traditional social control mechanism of Hindu society could therefore successfully adapt itself to the changes in the political structure of the country and in the organisation of its social production. The most important innovation of this period, through which the Raja–pundit nexus now started operating, was a new institution called *dal*, which in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries performed the same functions as those of the *samajas* of the pre-colonial times.[49] The only modernist change that could be detected—and indeed which made it more effective and universalising—was that while the reach of the *samajas* was local or at best territorial, the *dal* system spread over an entire linguistic region. These *dals*,

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[46] For more discussion on this, see M. Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and Backward Classes in India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: 1984).
[47] J. D. M. Derrett, *Religion, Law and State in India* (London: 1968), pp. 239–40.
[48] Cited in Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (London: 2001), p. 209.
[49] S. N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Essays in Urban History* (Calcutta: 1993).

which were composed of members of a variety of castes and were led by the absentee landlords and Rajas, advised by a select group of priests and pundits, operated from the colonial metropolis of Calcutta and performed, as a late nineteenth century observer noted, 'the functions of the Rajas of the pre-colonial days'.[50]

The caste questions in colonial Bengal were initially under the jurisdiction of the *jatimala cutcheries*, which started operating from the early days of the Company's rule, and were presided over by its commercial agents or *banyas*, like Raja Nabakrishna Deb, Ganga Gobinda Singh or Krishna Kanta Nandi. But these *cutcheries* do not seem to have had any effective jurisdiction beyond Calcutta and over the higher castes and by the beginning of the nineteenth century they were all but defunct. Now caste disputes, though theoretically under the jurisdiction of the colonial courts, became for all practical purposes the prerogative of the *dalapatis*, that is, the leaders of the *dals*.[51] It was almost entirely on them that the interpretation, arbitration and modification of the customary laws depended; they were, however, advised on such matters by the learned pundits. There also appeared around this time a number of supra-*dals*, which were referred to variously as *sabha* or *samaja*. Each consisted of a number of local *dals* and thus cut across the territorial boundaries of Calcutta and connected the city to the country. These *dals* did not merely revolve round the Brahman and the Kayastha *dalapatis* of Calcutta. There were important *dals* that centred around the Mullick families of Pathuriaghata and Burrabazar, belonging to the Saptagramiya Subarnabanik *jati* or the Sett and Basak families of the Tantubanik caste, enjoying a not so enviable location in the local ritual hierarchy. This *dal* system which was used as an apparatus of social control, continued with varied degrees of effectiveness till about the end of the nineteenth century. Then, as John McGuire has noted, it 'became increasingly more diffuse as capitalist development broke down the relationships upon which it was based. Yet this process of disintegration was long and complex.'[52]

III

This possibility of disintegration of the controlling authority of Hindu society brings us to the various discourses that apparently challenged

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[50] S. C. Bose, *The Hindoos As They Are*, second edn (Calcutta: 1883), p. 167.
[51] S. N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Essays in Urban History*, pp. 172–75.
[52] John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadralok in Calcutta, 1857–1885* (Canberra: 1983), p. 35.

the caste system, but which the system successfully withstood and absorbed into itself at various junctures throughout the colonial period. The supposed attrition, therefore, seemed to be far from reality during this time frame. The first of these challenges came from the English-educated, middle class youth, the 'Young Bengal' variety, who resorted to individual rebellions against the rigours of caste rules through their 'furtive feast(s) at Wilson's on champagne and beef'. This compelled a 'Hindoo Meeting' of 'Rajah' and 'Pundits', held at the Oriental Seminary on 25 May 1851, 'to acknowledge that it may be possible to give additional strength to the body corporate by a slight relaxation of its stringency.' It was decided that such adventurers would be readmitted if they offered a 'pecuniary gift'. This 'slight relaxation' it was hoped, would keep 'the barriers of caste unaltered'.[53] Indeed, in the nineteenth century, as Shib Chandra Bose observed, 'money' had acquired 'the power of restoring caste'.[54] Such deviations from the moral behavioural codes were generally dealt with individually and were often pardoned after the performance of *prayaschitta* or the purificatory rites. The caste system in this way withstood the destabilising impact of a rationalist modernity and its material culture by making piecemeal adjustments to accommodate attitudinal changes in society. But the adjustments were made only for those who could afford to pay for them. Ramdulal Dey, one of the most successful merchants of Calcutta, could therefore boast that his caste was in his cash box.[55]

But attempts at any fundamental organisational change were more vehemently resisted using every available discursive tool. Therefore, more important to our discussion is the discourse that sought to resist reformist challenges interrogating the caste system and thereby the basic normative tenets of Hindu society. Since these reformist attacks were believed to have been inspired by the western modernist concept of 'equality', as against the ideology of 'hierarchy' enshrined in the caste system, there were attempts to prove that equality itself was an irrelevant and utopian notion. But this discourse, which looked very anti-modern in its appearance, did in fact borrow selectively from the western modernist discourses to defend its tradition. Numerous Bengali tracts appeared around this time to argue that there was nothing

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[53] *Friend of India*, 5.6.1851, in Benoy Ghose (ed.), *Selections from English Periodicals of 19th Century Bengal*, Vol. III (Calcutta: 1980), pp. 43–44.
[54] S. C.Bose, *The Hindoos As They Are*, p. 179.
[55] Amitabha Mukhopadhyay, *Jatibhedpratha O Unish Sataker Bangalee Samaj* (Calcutta: 1981), p. 65.

unnatural in the caste system, since segmentation in one form or another had been present in all societies, in western societies more particularly, at every period of history. So it was of no use to assail the Hindus alone and much less fruitful would it be to try to dismantle this form of social organisation.[56] Another group of publicists, from an identical social background, brought in the principles of taxonomy from western natural sciences and argued that differentiation according to natural qualities or properties had been present in the entire living as well as inanimate world. So the caste system, as a classificatory scheme, was a natural phenomenon and therefore scientific.[57] Thus, if science had become the most authentic 'language of reform' in modern India, as Gyan Prakash has claimed,[58] then that language was also being appropriated to resist reform, in order to maintain the traditional power structure in a new paradigm of modernity.

If colonial modernity had a universalising tendency, the power of tradition was also innovative in resisting it and retaining its autonomy. The most effective argument to defend the caste system therefore hinged on the insistence that it was the essence of Hinduism, and so the destruction of one would mean the dissolution of the other. In 1883, Shib Chundra Bose very cautiously observed: 'Though in every sense of the word an anti-social institution, it [caste] is nevertheless the main support of the Hindu religion. Take away this support and you destroy the very life and vitality of that religion.'[59] The most powerful intervention in this area came in 1896 when Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya, a Sanskrit scholar from Nadia and the President of the Bengal Brahman Sabha, published his book *Hindu Castes and Sects*. In the very opening sentence of the book Bhattacharya located the cultural salience of India and of Hinduism in the caste system. 'The institution of caste', he writes, 'is a unique feature of

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[56] Siddheswar Ray, '*Jatibhed*', *Nabyabharat*, vol. 16, no. 16, Chaitra 1305 B.S., pp. 622–923; Surendranath Mitra, *'Adarsh Jiban O Samaj Sanskar'*, *Nabyabharat*, vol. 28, no. 2, Jaishtha 1317 B.S., p. 122; Umeshchandra Duttagupta, *Jatimala Sar Sangraha* (Khulna: 1320 B.S.), pp. 1–2; Sarat Mukherjee, '*Amerikay Jatibhed*', *Bangabani*, vol. 2, 2nd half, no. 1, Bhadra 1330 B.S., p. 45; Bejoy Chandra Mazumder, '*Jatibhed*' *Bangabani*, vol. 3, 2nd half, no. 6, Magh 1331 B.S.

[57] Munirishi Sharma, *Pashu-Shastram* (Calcutta: 1898), pp. 9–10; Dharmananda Mahabharati, '*Barnashramtattwa*', *Nabyabharat*, vol. 22, no. 10, Magh 1311 B.S., pp. 500–01; Chintaharan Chattopadhyay, *Brahman* (Faridpur: 1317 B.S.), p. 23; Sasadhar Ray, 'Barnatattwa', *Nabyabharat*, vol. 30, no. 6, Aswin 1319 B.S., p. 344.

[58] Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: 1999), p. 60.

[59] S. C.Bose, *The Hindoos As They Are*, p. 163.

Hindu society, and as nothing exactly like it is to be found in any other part of the world.…' He criticises Western observers like M. A. Sherring and 'Hindu scholars' like R. C. Dutt who believed in them, for misrepresenting the caste system as a divisive social order that denied rights to the general masses. 'I am no out-and-out admirer of caste, as it exists now', he tells us in the same conciliatory tone as Bose, 'and I think that…its discipline might be relaxed in certain directions with advantage. But I believe that, generally speaking, there does not exist that antipathy between the several castes which the world at large has been led to believe.' On the contrary, he argues, this system 'provided the bonds of union between races and clans that had nothing in common before its introduction. Indeed, so inclusive and accommodative was this concept, as opposed to the Western theory of race, that it could even incorporate the English into its structure, conferring on them the status of 'Sakya Seni Rajputs', if of course, they embraced its philosophy and 'refrained from eating forbidden food'. Therefore, 'Any little split that is caused by caste now and then is far outweighed by the union of races and clans which it has promoted and fostered, and there is no justification whatever for the abuse which has been heaped upon its authors.'[60]

The talk of reform in this spirited defence of the caste system was of course a concession to the Indian modernists and Western critics; but the idea of the uniqueness of caste as a signifier of the cultural superiority of the Hindus and the notion of its organic connection with Hindu unity and identity gradually became a general Bengali common sense. Within a quarter of a century this sentiment came to be shared by a wide range of people in Bengal from Chintaharan Chattopadhyay, a Brahman pundit of village Sundisar in Dacca district, to Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, the celebrated teacher of history at the Bengal National School. In 1910 Deuskar wrote in a little known pamphlet: 'These days, to the people of this country, destruction of caste system has become synonymous with the destruction of Hinduism.'[61] Within a few months, Chattopadhyay noted in the same tone: 'Casteism is integrally related to Hinduism. For maintaining family life and Hindu identity, it is essential to preserve the caste system.'[62] Both of them belonged to the same elite group that was

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[60] Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects* (1896, reprint, Calcutta: 1968), pp. 1–7.
[61] Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, *Bangiyo Hindujati ki dhangsonmukh* (Calcutta: 1317 B.S.), p. 116.
[62] Chintaharan Chattopadhyay, *Brahman*, p. 19.

carefully building up this notion of an organic connection between caste and Hindutva. This system of differentiation and hierarchy, which incorporated all into an organic whole, as many of its high caste defenders argued, was inviolable, because it was divinely ordained[63]—an idea that could well beseech people to adhere to the moral behavioural codes of Hindu society and thereby conserve its internal harmony against possibilities of subversion from inside, as well as from outside, by a modernising colonial state. It is interesting to note that as late as in 1934 the two Hindu members of the Bengal government, Charu Chandra Ghosh and Bejoy Prasad Singh Roy, opposed the Depressed Classes Status Bill, which proposed to confer on the untouchables the status of Sudra, in the following manner:

> The laws of caste by which the Hindu society is governed were not king-made laws. They are supposed to have been derived from the *Rishis* and are considered to be divine laws enforced by royal sanction. So the right of the legislature to modify these laws in order to bring about a change in the constitution of the Hindu society is extremely doubtful…[64]

In reality, however, the so-called modernist reform movements did not pose any major challenge, as the reformist discourse was from the very beginning weakened by contradictions. The most important of these reform endeavours was the Brahmo movement and its ambivalence on the caste question is well known. Rammohun Roy, though he himself preached the gospel of equality, never dared to give up his sacred thread, nor did he ever personally transgress the codes of caste. Debendranath Tagore thought that the time had not yet come when the differences of caste could be done away with.[65] Many of those Brahmos, who had given up their sacred thread under the influence of Bejoykrishna Goswami, later performed rites of penance and donned it again.[66] Even Shibnath Shastri, under whose initiative

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[63] Purnachandra Basu, *'Barnabhed O Jatyantar Parinam'*, *Nabyabharat*, vol. 18, no. 2, Jaishtha 1307 B.S., p. 72; Lakshminarayan Tarkachudamoni, *Jati Bikas* Part I (Rangpur: 1911), pp. 5–7.

[64] Note by C. C. Ghosh and B. P. Singh Roy, dated 14.3.1934, Government of Bengal (hereafter GB), Home (Confidential) File No. 210/34. KW, p. 3, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

[65] Dilip Kumar Chattopadhyay, *Dynamics of Social Change in Bengal (1817–1851)* (Calcutta: 1990), pp. 236–40.

[66] Srinath Chanda, *Brahmo Samajar Challis Bachhar* (Mymenshingh: n.d.), pp. 132–34.

a Depressed Classes Mission was started in Bengal in 1909, could discard his sacred thread only after a good deal of hesitation, when in fact he could not defer this decision any longer.[67] This ambivalence was present at every level of Bengali Hindu society and was shared by a variety of people ranging from the leaders of religious, social, political and literary movements, down to village pundits and priests in the countryside. While untouchability was assailed, caste as a system of social differentiation was spared and, as a defence against the mounting cultural challenge of the West, was even accepted and glorified as a part of India's great cultural heritage. Social relations in Bengal in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries therefore could hardly be expected to deviate from the old dominant hierarchic patterns of traditional Hinduism.[68]

However, the most important challenge to the structure of Hindu society, which it successfully absorbed into itself, was provided by the fact of economic mobility, which threatened to disrupt the linkages between caste and power. The Hindu caste system always had the flexibility to recognise and accommodate changes in the distribution of politico-economic power in society. The up and pushing dominant groups from below were accommodated from time to time at higher levels within the hierarchy of castes and such positional readjustments thus kept the basic structure intact. By the end of the nineteenth century, all the *jatis* to which the rentier aristocracy of Bengal belonged had been proclaimed by the Nabadwip pundits as either twice born or clean Shudra.[69] Even in the twentieth century, these pundits continued to issue their *vyavastha* or religious verdicts elevating the ritual rank of various upwardly mobile groups, their judgment being determined by the present secular position of the caste concerned. Such mobility, therefore, instead of wrecking the ritual hierarchy, actually strengthened the caste-based stratification system and hence posed absolutely no threat to social harmony among the Hindus.

It was through the exclusive caste associations of such upwardly mobile groups, which began to replace the multi-caste *dals* in Bengal after 1905, that more and more upper caste behavioural norms based essentially on hierarchical ethos found acceptance and wider currency in society. Thus if these associations were agents of

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[67] Hemlata Devi, *Pandit Shibnath Shastrir Jibancharit* (Calcutta: 1327 B.S.), p. 83.
[68] Details in S.Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 122–27.
[69] McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind*, p. 16.

modernisation, as claimed by Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph,[70] they also created a space for renewed and reinvigorated life for traditional culture and its greater homogenisation. For if culture is an interlocking system of symbols with shared meanings,[71] then status in Hindu society could only be signified through the ritual symbols of caste. Therefore, those who moved up in class and formed these associations now sought to legitimise their new secular status by endorsing and appropriating the symbols of high ritual status. What further contributed to it was the development of another genre of print culture—'low' level journalistic literature, subscribed to and patronised by the intermediate peasant and trading castes and some of the more successful dalit groups. As a local study of the relatively underdeveloped district of Bankura shows, not only were the contributors and subscribers to these journals located in remote villages, but often the initiative to publish such journals and other caste manuals came from such less developed areas away from the colonial metropolis.[72] This resulted in a significant extension of the public space, where the cultural discourses of caste were reproduced and debated. But what needs to be underscored here is that this behaviour was not simply a voluntary act of emulation motivated by an imitative urge, as indicated in the familiar 'Sanskritisation' discourse.[73] What Srinivas's theoretical formulation does not take into account is the element of compulsion involved in this acculturation process. Moving up in the status ranking scale of Hindu society made acceptance of its appropriate behavioural norms mandatory. And ritual rank was considered to be important, as the positive correlation between ritual rank and secular status still had relevance in society, and the two systems of stratification, if they were independent at all, were always expected to maintain a symmetrical relationship.

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[70] Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition—Political Development in India* (Chicago, London: 1967).

[71] As Clifford Geertz argues: 'Believing… that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs…' See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: 1973), p. 5. The caste system certainly constitutes an important part of such webs of signification for Hindus, and therefore status could be culturally transmitted only through its idioms.

[72] Sekhar Bhowmik, *'Ouponibesik juge banglar ek "anagrasar" jelay samajik andolaner kahini'*, Souvenir of the U. G. C. Sponsored State Level Conference on 'Recent Perspectives of History', 13th and 14th February, 2002, Department of History, Mahishadal Raj College, Mahishadal, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal.

[73] M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Indian edn (New Delhi: 1977), pp. 1–45.

It was through this acculturation process that the socially mobile individuals of the lower ranking castes gradually dissociated themselves from their less fortunate caste brethren and, with a *de facto* elevation of their ritual status, got co-opted into the power structure of Hindu society. This mobility, the result of the colonial economic policies that clearly sought to promote individual and transferable property rights, was not corporate, as it is often believed. There is clear evidence which indicates that even within the same linguistic region, that of Bengal proper, there were significant local variations in the rank of a particular caste and these variations had a definite correlation with its differentiated secular status. For example, the Namasudras were not actually considered untouchables in east Bengal, where they had emerged in the late nineteenth century as a successful pioneer cultivator community. But in the western districts they were regarded as such, as numerically and economically they were much worse off here.[74] In other words, as the material conditions of the members of a caste varied from locality to locality, so did their entitlement to ritual privileges.[75] It is only the standardising tendency of a colonial 'ethnographic state',[76] which has given us the image of a static Hindu society, where in fact caste, class and power tended to maintain a 'dynamic equilibrium'.[77]

The co-option of the upwardly mobile groups in a way also marginalised them by neutralising their potential challenge to the hierarchical social organisation of Hindu society. But the question is, those who remained located at the intersection of lower class as well as caste positions—the poorer sections of the untouchable and the backward castes—how did they respond to their powerlessness? And how did the caste associations and their printed journals impact upon their mentalities? Did they promote conformity or encourage self-respect and resistance to the hegemony of caste? In the absence of direct evidence, we can perhaps attempt here some informed speculation, keeping in mind two important caveats. First, the impact of print culture on a lower caste peasant population, where literacy rates were extremely poor, was bound to be limited. Second, this lower caste literature, as Sumit Sarkar has pointed out, was remarkably

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[74] S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (Richmond, Surrey: 1977), p. 16.
[75] 'Ethnographical Papers', Mss. Eur, E101, vol. VI, India Office Library, London.
[76] For more on this, see Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, Oxford: 2001).
[77] Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability* (New York, London: 1969), p. 12.

silent about the grievances of the peasantry.[78] Yet, this print culture and caste association politics could have an impact on the peasantry and it could be entirely different from that intended by its authors—it could generate in them a sense of self-respect and an urge for self-affirmation.[79]

To take an example, in May 1911 a series of riots took place between the Namasudras and Muslims in the interior villages within the jurisdiction of Kalia Police Station in Jessore district. The conflict was generated by the newly acquired sense of identity and self-respect on the part of the former. Newspapers did not generally find their way to these remote areas, but a copy of the *Namasudra Suhrid*, the journal of their caste movement centred at Faridpur, was found in the post-riot debris. Very few people could read the journal here, but when 'reading aloud' was a tradition that was quite in vogue in the late nineteenth century among the lower caste, urban artisan population of Calcutta, there is no reason why it would not be in vogue in the rural areas in the early twentieth.[80] Print culture, therefore, established a connection with the folk tradition of orality as a conduit for transmitting messages to the larger non-literate community. And in the process of transmission the message was also in all probability transfigured. As Natalie Davis has shown, the practice of 'reading aloud' in the villages of sixteenth century France involved a good deal of 'translating' and 'editing' of the content of the printed material for the comprehension of the listeners who could understand only their local dialects.[81] Extending that analogy we may perhaps argue that the content of the *Namasudra Suhrid* was transmitted by word of mouth by the few who could read it, and in the process of making the transition from the printed to the oral, the message was redefined into one that suited the emotional needs of the recipients—the Namasudra peasants who protested against being humiliated by the local Muslims and Kayasthas or to being oppressed by the landlords. In other words, what we may argue is that when the Namasudra peasants in the

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[78] Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (New Delhi: 2002), chapter 2.

[79] Indeed, as Roger Chartier has argued, 'the determination to impose cultural models on the people does not guarantee the way in which [cultural forms] are used, adapted and understood.' See Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: 1995), p. 91.

[80] Anindita Ghosh, 'Revisiting the "Bengal Renaissance": Literary Bengali and Low-Life Print in Colonial Calcutta', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 October 2002.

[81] Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Printing and the People', in C. Mukerji and M. Schudson (eds), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: 1991), p. 71.

remote villages of Jessore and Khulna got involved in riots against Muslims calling them *charals* (a derogatory distortion of the word Chandal); or claimed their rights to enter the community puja grounds organised by the Kayasthas; or demanded a two-thirds share of the produce from their *zamindars*, their actions were not entirely unconnected to their caste movement, which was centred in Faridpur and predominantly inculcated a message of Sanskritisation.[82] However, it is also true that these moments of protest made hegemony and domination more prominent realities in the quotidian lives of the Namasudra peasantry.

There were, of course, other autonomous epistemological domains where discourses of protest flourished and the most important of them was the bhakti tradition, which provided a space for the lower orders of society to imagine their defiance of the hegemony of the Brahmanical dharma. In Bengal the *Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampraday* turned into an institution that helped the lower caste people to construct a new sense of self-respect and also to assert it in larger social spheres.[83] But gradually, in course of time, the sect's image of protest and irreverence was submerged in the acceptance of the established *Smarta-Puranic* orthodoxy of the six Goswamis of Vrindavan. Through its uninhibited appropriation of the symbols of order, circumspection and authority, it developed, as one historian writes, the image of a 'neo-Brahman order', promoting the teleologies of the establishment, rather than 'social revolution'.[84] The more radical *Sahajiya* cults, on the other hand, deriving their heritage from a *tantrik* tradition and inspired by non-Brahman gurus, continued to interrogate the caste system.[85] But the dominant Hindu society gradually marginalised this stream of protest, by stereotyping such groups as exotic, deviant or heretical sects, or even worse, as assemblies of licentious, low caste people united to indulge in illicit sexual activities, with an ever increasing number of bastards swelling their ranks.[86] The lower caste Vaishnavas, often referred to as *Jat Vaishnava*, ultimately ended up as another

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[82] For more details on the Namasudra movement, see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity.*

[83] H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, pp. 58–59, 185.

[84] Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1985), pp. 90, 322.

[85] Edward C. Dimock Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon; Erotic Mysticism in the Vaishnava Sahajiya Cult of Bengal* (Chicago, London: 1966), pp. 70–71, 82–83.

[86] Narendranarayan Raychaudhuri, *Samaj-Chitra* (Calcutta: 1322 B.S.), p. 117; Madhusudan Tattawabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas* (Hooghly: 1333 B.S.), pp. 399–405.

category of outcastes, enumerated separately in the successive census reports of the twentieth century (see chapter 2).

There were other deviant sects as well, which had emerged among some of the more self-assertive lower castes and we shall discuss these movements in greater details in the next chapter. We can mention some of them briefly here, as examples of lower caste protest. The Matua sect, which developed among the Namasudras of eastern Bengal, initially challenged the ideology of hierarchy and proposed to rework the relations of power in local society by subverting the ritual order, which was its supportive base. But ultimately its subversive edge was blunted, as the Namasudra community felt the compulsion to conform to the moral and behavioural codes of Hindu society, as that was the only available means to social mobility. And if subversion was difficult, imagining inversion of ritual hierarchy was even more rare and isolated. Though the Hadis of Nadia, organised through the Balahadi or Balarami sect, could visualise an inverted hierarchy by imagining a degraded status for the Brahmans,[87] further east in the district of Mymensingh, their counterparts, who called themselves Bhuimali, could not but seek the help of the Brahmans and zamindars for an improvement of their ritual status within the constituted order.[88] The protest of the Balahadi sect, because of its extremely marginal character, could not bring in any change in Bengal's caste society or in the position of the Hadis. What Partha Chatterjee therefore finds in the social history of this sect is not just a 'spirit of resolute negativity', but also 'its practical defeat'.[89] In other words, although protests appeared from time to time, the hegemonic Hindu culture set the limits of imagination for the lower orders in such a way that they could not ultimately think of subverting the ritual hierarchy or repudiating its moral-behavioural codes—at least not in open defiance. The protests as a result were also either gradually co-opted or marginalised as secret exotic rituals of certain small closed religious groups (see chapter 2).

This process of appropriation created the illusion that the lower castes were even more zealous in upholding caste restrictions and

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[87] Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Subaltern Consciousness', in R. Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society (New Delhi: 1989).

[88] R. L. Chakraborty, 'A Caste Movement in Mymensingh', S. Bandyopadhyay, A. Dasgupta, W. van Schendel (eds), *Bengal: Development, Communities and States* (New Delhi: 1994).

[89] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, New Jersey: 1993), p. 197.

disabilities than their social superiors.[90] It is not unusual for oppressed groups to espouse the ideologies of oppression as their own; that is how hegemony works. But this consent is also produced by coercion and repression. As an early twentieth century observer noted: 'A sort of instinctive *dread* of breaking caste puts the idea of doing without caste absolutely beyond the range of possibilities to their minds.'[91] It was from this intuitive fear that *respect* for the caste system originated and became a part of the common sense of the masses of Hindus. Indeed, how the popular mind was conditioned becomes clearer from another observation of the same period:

> Each caste considers itself as only a petty member of a mighty body and it never entered into its dreams to set itself in opposition to the central authority.... A man had no place unless he belonged to a caste; everyone therefore looked upon his caste as a valuable privilege, and no one would be foolhardy enough to lose this by offending the Brahmanical authority....[92]

While talking about 'theories of roles' in relation to Muslim-Namasudra relationship in post-colonial Bengal, Beth Roy writes that 'social ways of being are learned through imitation.... How we are treated conveys messages, and often those messages are more compelling than verbal ones and also less available to critical reexamination.'[93] It is this phenomenon of social acculturation that has given rise to the notion of absence of conflict in Hindu caste society. We should, however, remember that the authority, which enforced this social conformity, was not just sanctified by religion, but was also rooted in control over economic and political power, and in the case of the untouchables and lower castes, their inferior caste status almost invariably converged with their powerlessness.

IV

It was the Depressed Classes movement with its modernist aspirations, which posed potentially the most serious challenge to this

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[90] Kshitimohan Sen, *Jatibhed* (Calcutta: 1946), p. 96.
[91] N. Sengupta, 'The Census and Caste', *The Dacca Review*, vol. 1, no. 6, September 1911, p. 200, emphasis added.
[92] Jatindra Chandra Guha, 'Reform in the Hindoo Society', *The Dacca Review*, vol. 1, no. 9, 1911, pp. 284–85.
[93] Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict* (New Delhi: 1996), p. 147.

organisation of power in Hindu society in the early twentieth century. It was equally against domination and exploitation by the power elites, as against the religious idioms of purity and pollution. In other words, the leaders of the Depressed Classes realised that although religious ideology provided a space for representing domination and also for contesting it, it was inextricably intertwined with the structure of power. The agenda of this movement testifies to the truth of this contention. The movement demanded not just the elimination of caste disabilities or access to temples, but more concrete material privileges, like political representation, education, employment—all necessary for reworking the relations of power in society or more particularly, within the emerging structures of a modern nation, which ironically was increasingly being defined by the cultural idioms of Hindudom. The nationalist leadership initially proposed a social solution to the caste question, locating it in the inner domain of culture where, as argued by Partha Chatterjee, the nation was already feeling to be sovereign, as opposed to the public sphere where it had allegedly surrendered to a modernising colonial state.[94] But as our evidence suggests, in certain areas at least the boundaries between social and political were soon elided and—despite Gandhi's continued insistence on a social solution—the essentially political campaign of the Depressed Classes surged ahead with its insistent demands for substantive citizenship.[95] Towards the end of the colonial period, this forced upon the nationalist leadership the imperative to confront the issue at the political plane and to try to co-opt the Depressed Classes into the emergent power structure of the Indian nation, which would legitimise its claim to speak for everyone within its territorial boundaries. We should remember, however, that this symbolic incorporation was also associated with the process of social mobility, or in other words, it affected more certainly the advanced sections of the Depressed Classes. For the rest of these communities, whose subordinate status in society was embedded at an intersection of class and caste, their identification with the political nation remained an ambivalent area of their consciousness, open to diverse historical interpretations. We will discuss these complexities in more detail in the fifth chapter. It will be more pertinent here to have a general

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[94] P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 6.

[95] We should add here a caveat that the Depressed Classes movement remained divided by 'class', as it only rarely took into consideration the grievances or demands of the peasantry, such as better rights for the tenants. For more on this see S. Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, chapters 2 and 3.

discussion on the political discourses on caste, that had begun to grapple with the untouchability issue within the public domain in the early twentieth century as a strategy to contain the Depressed Classes movement, and which continues even today in the rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar.

It was during the Swadeshi period (1905–11) that the high caste *bhadralok* of Bengal first encountered a political challenge from the lower castes, some of whom asserted that they had nothing in common with the Hindus and therefore deserved special political privileges as had been offered to the Muslims. This forced upon the leaders of Hindu society a political campaign to co-opt these lower caste dissidents, not so much to ensure their social or ritual uplift, but to strengthen the position of the 'Hindus' against the 'Muslims' in a political game of numbers. Col. U. N. Mukherjee in a book called *Hindus—A Dying Race*, published in 1909, tried to make the Hindus conscious of their dwindling numbers and Sarada Charan Mitter, an ex-judge of the Calcutta High Court, actually started a pan-Hindu movement to win back the untouchables and other lower castes into the Hindu fold. Simultaneous with this, political organisations like Swadesh Bandhab Samiti and Faridpur District Association in eastern Bengal continued to promise social privileges to the Depressed Classes if they joined the Swadeshi movement.[96]

But this strategy was unlikely to satisfy the political aspirations of the Depressed Classes and hence in 1917–18 when the Montagu-Chelmsford reform proposals were under discussion, they demanded 'communal representation' for themselves.[97] Hindu solidarity and their relative strength against the Muslims were now clearly under threat. A series of frantic appeals by a number of Bengali intellectuals therefore followed, but could not change the mind of the estranged Depressed Classes, as the appeals focused more on the 'social', rather than on the 'political' aspect of the problem. For example, when Srinath Datta argued in an article in *Nabyabharat*[98] that in the Congress every caste from Brahman to Bagdi or from Kayastha to Keora had equal rights, he was only referring to social relations and not to power sharing or access to leadership roles, from which the lower castes remained excluded. His assertion that the new electoral system would never mean any domination of a particular caste over others, therefore, appeared to be just empty rhetoric. The noted

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[96] S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 64–98.
[97] *Bengalee*, 10 November 1917; *The Statesman*, 5 November 1918.
[98] *Nabyabharat*, vol. 37, no. 5, Bhadra 1326 B.S., pp. 233–35.

scientist Prafulla Chandra Ray took the political reforms for granted: at a meeting on 21 March 1920 he assured the Depressed Classes that there was no fear of Brahman rule in a future nation state, as no one trying to build 'India as a nation … would be able to exclude them [the depressed classes] from it.'[99] The grammarian Madhusudan Kabyabyakarantirtha too privileged social reform over the political, as far as the untouchability issue was concerned. In a treatise[100] he reasoned that there was no scriptural injunction against accepting food and water from the hands of the Namasudras and other untouchable groups. So unless this essential social reform was initiated immediately, he cautioned the nationalists, independence would continue to elude their efforts. Another noted Bengali scientist Meghnad Saha also emphasised, at the Bengal Youth Conference in 1922, that India's problems were not just political, but social too, and that these included untouchability.[101] In his frame of reference, the political problem related only to the subjection of the nation to foreign rule, but not to hierarchies of subordination within the nation itself.

What resonated in the statements of all these early twentieth century intellectuals was a deeply held trust in a re-imagined caste system representing a moral social order that differentiated India from the modern Western modes of social organisation marked by class and conflict. The only blemish in this superior moral world was untouchability, which was considered to be more an aberration than an integral part of *varnashram dharma* and therefore could be rectified through good willed social reform. This was a belief shared by a wide range of Bengali social thinkers from Swami Vivekananda to Rabindranath Tagore,[102] and it later found legitimacy in the thoughts of Gandhi, whose *harijan* campaign, it has been argued, sought to dignify the untouchables, but was reluctant to empower them.[103]

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[99] Prafulla Chandra Ray, *Jatibhed O Patitya Samasya* (Calcutta: 1920), pp. 17–18, 29.

[100] M. Kabyabyakarantirtha, *Nimna O Patitjat* (Calcutta: 1328 B.S.), pp. 90–92, 137–57.

[101] Meghnad Saha, *'Jatiya Unnatir Upay'*, *Nabyabharat*, vol. 40, no. 8, Agrahayan 1329 B.S., p. 377.

[102] For a discussion in greater detail on the thoughts of these intellectuals see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 123–24.

[103] For a discussion on Gandhi's discourse on untouchability, see Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse* (New Delhi, Newbury Park, London: 1989), pp. 207–46.

What all of them failed to see was that the Depressed Classes were more interested in having access to political power, and not simply some social rights, as a necessary precondition for their true liberation. It was only wealth and power, which they thought could bring any effective and sustainable change in their ritual status. To them appeals for mere social reforms were to obfuscate the real issue, since orthodox politicians like Bipin Chandra Pal were still insisting that the country must be 'reconquer[ed]' first, before 'democratic reforms' could even be discussed.[104] The nationalist discourse throughout this period sought to integrate such groups into their projected 'nation' by offering them only some limited social rights, while continually neglecting the more important question of 'democratic reforms', or in other words, the political issue of equal citizenship. It was therefore not surprising that the Gandhian Non-Co-operation Movement had mixed responses from the lower orders of Hindu society in Bengal. The middle peasant castes like the Mahishyas of Midnapur readily identified themselves with the movement. In their journal *Mahishya Samaj*, the word *jati* was frequently used interchangeably to mean both nation and caste, and the liberation of one became homologous to the emancipation of the other. But the response of the dalit groups like the Namasudras and Rajbansis was rather limited, as there was nothing in the Congress programme that could address their political demand.[105] It was no wonder that an articulate Depressed Class like the Namasudras would reiterate around this time their demand for separate representation and would claim for their caste no less than one-third of all the non-Mohammedan seats in the Bengal Legislative Council.[106]

The Depressed Classes movement thus never allowed the 'caste question' to disappear from the public sphere,[107] and it ultimately forced the other political groups to address this issue in their own

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[104] Bipin Chandra Pal, *'Anadhinata na Swadhinata'*, *Nabyabharat,* vol. 39, no. 5, Bhadra 1328 B.S., p. 279.

[105] See for example, *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha 1319 B.S., Ashwin 1329 B.S.; 'History of the Non-Co-operation Movement in Bengal', GB, Home (Confidential) File no. 395/1924, pp. 10–13; Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875–1927* (New Delhi: 1984), pp. 306–07.

[106] J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: 1968), pp. 159–60.

[107] If we use 'public sphere' in a Habermasian sense of being 'a sphere mediating between state and society, a sphere in which the public as the vehicle of public opinion is formed', Jurgen Habermas, 'The Public Sphere', in C. Mukerji and and M. Schudson (eds), *Rethinking Popular Culture*, p. 399.

interest. In the troubled days of high communal tension, following the breakdown of C. R. Das's Bengal Pact with the Muslims,[108] the incorporation of these classes into the main body of Hindu society became an even more urgent political necessity. So leaders like Digindranarayan Bhattacharya or Prafulla Chandra Ray, who had connections with both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress, now began to argue in public meetings in favour of eliminating untouchability and integrating the untouchables into the Hindu society.[109] Pradip Datta has shown that the concerns expressed in U. N. Mukherjee's book, *The Dying Race,* had been grafted onto a 'Hindu communal common sense' in the early twentieth century Bengal.[110] The major feature of this discourse was a fear of a future in which the Hindu race would lose political power to the Muslims. One of the supposed reasons for this was the conversion of the untouchables, which not only reduced their numbers, but also led to a diminution of the physical power of the Hindu community, as the adivasi and the dalit were thought to be the only repositories of masculinity in a society that was stereotyped as effeminate in the colonial racial discourse.[111] To reclaim and assert Hindu power, mobilisation of these marginal groups had therefore become a political priority.

A number of Hindu religious organisations embarked on a project to mobilise such groups. Most crucial in this respect were the endeavours of the All India Hindu Mahasabha. Ever since it started functioning in Bengal in 1923 it targeted the lower caste peasantry for political mobilisation. Following Veer Savarkar's invention of a territorial definition of Hindutva, the Mahasabha leaders in Bengal were claiming that the Hindus were a natural birth-community of India. '[W]e are all Hindus and own a common blood', wrote Savarkar, using the metaphor of 'common blood' as a trope for shared memory and cultural difference vis-à-vis the outsiders—the Muslims and the

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[108] For details, see Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920–47: The Land Question* (Calcutta: 1984), pp. 66–80; S. Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905–47* (New Delhi: 1991), chapters 3 and 4.

[109] S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 136–37.

[110] P. K. Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal* (New Delhi: 1999).

[111] See John Roselli, 'The Self-image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Past and Present*, vol. 86, 1980; Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, 'The Effeminate and the Masculine: Nationalism and the Concept of Race in Colonial Bengal', in Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (New Delhi: 1995), p. 290.

Christians. In this framework, both Aryans and non-Aryans were a part of Hindudom, as they followed religions born in India, as opposed to those who came from outside her imagined territorial boundaries. By that definition, the dalit were as much Hindu as anyone else.[112]

This story of the Hindu nationalist mobilisation of the dalit has been narrated in detail in the fifth chapter. Here we may mention that this project of the political incorporation of the dalit into a re-invented Hindu national identity was as much to take a position against its imagined Other—the Muslims and the British—as it was to restore the internal order of the house. The untouchables around this time had been showing a lot of self-assertiveness and independence of action, potentially endangering the power structure within the Hindu community. For example, some time in the early 1920s the Namasudras had fought their way into the famous Kamakhya temple in Assam.[113] In 1926, Jogendranath Mandal, an as-yet-unknown Namasudra student at Brajomohan College in Barisal, had organised a vigorous campaign in support of one of his Namasudra classmates who had been assaulted by the higher castes for the alleged crime of entering the local *Kalibari* (Kali temple).[114] In the same year a similar incident—a Namasudra inadvertently touching a Brahman priest and being heckled afterwards—had created a public furor in eastern Bengal.[115] The people who were really alarmed at these recent developments were the protagonists of Hindu solidarity, who apprehended that such independent initiative and militant self-consciousness of the lower castes might lead to a division in Hindu society and create difficulties in offering a united front against the Muslims. The famous Munshiganj *satyagraha* in 1929, under the leadership of Swami Satyananda of the Hindu Mission, was a direct outcome of this Hindu solidarity project. Without any assistance forthcoming from a vacillating Congress high command, the *satyagraha* continued for 261 days, and succeeded ultimately in opening the gates of the Kali temple at Munshiganj in Dacca for the untouchables. Although this single event could hardly mitigate the problems of the Depressed Classes,

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[112] Christoffe Jaffrelot, 'The Idea of the Hindu Race in the Writings of the Hindu Nationalist Ideologues in the 1920s and 1930s: A Concept Between Two Cultures', in P. Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, pp. 334–35.

[113] Madanmohan Bhaumik, *Muktir Pathe* (Calcutta: 1331 B.S.), p. 6.

[114] Jagadischandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Part I, (Calcutta: 1382 B.S.), p. 16.

[115] Kalidas Ray, '*Jatyabhiman*', *Bangabani*, vol. 5, 1st half, no. 5, Ashadh 1333 B.S., p. 494.

its symbolic significance was nevertheless immense.[116] It did not, however, mean that the Namasudras or other dalit groups of the region were integrated into Hindu society.

At another level, the local Congress at this juncture was also trying to integrate the Depressed Classes into the political nation, as in an atmosphere of communal tension these people had suddenly become politically very important. In 1926 at the Khulna district conference, the Congress volunteers ceremonially accepted food and water from the hands of the depressed Paundra Kshatriya caste. Around the same time, at a Namasudra meeting at Mohiniganj in Pabna, the Brahmans and Kayasthas present there, did the same.[117] Apart from such cosmetic action, the Congress during the last few years had given the untouchability removal programme greater prominence on its agenda, and as a Depressed Classes leader himself wrote, this evoked interest and optimism among such people.[118] But torn by faction fighting and internal tension, the party could not take advantage of the situation. The Calcutta Congress in 1928 therefore again resolved that it would be 'the duty of all Congressmen, being Hindu, to do all they can to remove untouchability…',[119] so that the untouchables could also be involved in the enterprise of nationalism. This approach was based on the same erroneous assumption that a social solution, without addressing the political question of citizenship and representation, could resolve the issue. Dalit participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement in Bengal, therefore, remained predictably low. And the possibility of any such nationalist coalition in future was easily derailed by the announcement of the Communal Award (1932) and the caste-Hindu backlash in Bengal against the loss of 30 reserved seats to the Scheduled Castes in the legislature under the provisions of the Poona Pact signed in September 1932.[120]

Referring to the Depressed Classes movement of this period, Dr Surendranath Sen observed in 1933 that it was 'a class problem,

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[116] For details of this movement, see B. Bhattacharya, *Satyagrahas in Bengal, 1921–39* (Calcutta: 1977), pp. 159–84; and S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 145–53.

[117] Manindranath Mandal, *Bange Digindranarayan* (Calcutta: 1333 B.S.), p. 17.

[118] Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Janasangha* (Khejuri, Midnapur: 1330 B.S.), p. 54.

[119] Circular letter No. 15 from President, BPCC, 17 March 1929, AICC Papers, File No. P-6, Part II, 1927, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

[120] Papiya Chakravarty, *Hindu Response to Nationalist Ferment* (Calcutta: 1992), pp. 319–34; S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 172–73.

and not a caste problem…' and that the Gandhian remedy of promoting temple entry and inter-dining would not solve it.[121] In other words, some piecemeal social reforms, without addressing the political question of citizenship and power sharing, would not resolve the issue of exclusion of the dalit. P. R. Thakur, a Bengali dalit leader, had already written to Gandhi that the problem of untouchability would not be solved by temple entry alone. 'Unless immediate measures are taken', he argued, 'towards the educational and economic advance of the depressed classes, this evil can never be eradicated. It seems impossible to cure a disease by suppressing its symptom.'[122] Congress endeavours in Bengal under the guidance of the local branch of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, which had no such miraculous therapeutic remedy in its repertoire, therefore failed to win over the political support of the Depressed Classes. Their movement, seeking access to political power for themselves, remained alienated and distanced from the nationalist mainstream till about 1937. The results of the election to the Bengal legislature in that year, returning only seven Congress and two Hindu Sabha nominees out of 32 successful candidates from such castes, and the subsequent support of these 'Independent' legislators for the Krishak Praja Party–Muslim League coalition ministry under A. K. Fazlul Huq, certainly indicated that.

V

At the very beginning of this chapter we had raised the question about the prospect of the dalit getting independent access to power within the institutionalised political space of modern India. It was from 1937 that this question began to appear at the foreground of Bengal politics. The sustained propaganda to construct an inclusive nation, albeit nominally, gradually began to impact upon the targeted population, as the Scheduled Caste movement began to succumb to such nationalist pressures. At this juncture it was no longer a homogeneous movement, as class contradictions and the aspirations of its elite leadership had begun to dissolve caste solidarities. Since the 1930s the movement had started pulling in several directions, thus weakening itself to some extent.[123] And after 1937 it was on class lines that this movement visibly fragmented and consequently was

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[121] Surendranath Sen, 'Untouchability in Bengal', *Forward*, 29 November 1933.
[122] *Liberty*, 18 February 1933.
[123] For details see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 142–99.

marginalised. During the last decade of colonial rule, when transfer of power became a distinct possibility and new political alignments were to be effected, the importance of the Scheduled Castes, representing a sizeable proportion of the non-Muslim population in Bengal, with 30 reserved seats in the provincial legislature, became unmistakably clear to everyone. The dominant political elites involved in the nation building project therefore attempted at long last a political solution by trying to appropriate the Scheduled Caste leadership through limited and symbolic sharing of power, as without their participation the 'nation' would not appear to be legitimate, either teleologically or instrumentally. But since the Scheduled Castes movement at this stage encapsulated various forms of consciousness, its appropriation and co-option also took place at different levels and was expressed in a variety of forms.

First of all, at an institutional level while a handful of Scheduled Caste leaders still stuck to their demand for a separate political identity and traditional alignment with the Muslim League, others, who gradually came to constitute the majority, began to join the Congress from the beginning of the 1940s. This reordering of political relations was effected through the agency of a new outfit called the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, initiated by Subhas Chandra Bose and rejuvenated, after his departure from India, by his brother Sarat Chandra Bose. As a result of their endeavours, the outcome of the election of 1946 signified a complete reversal of the results of 1937: in 30 reserved seats in the Bengal legislature 26 successful candidates were Congress nominees. Among four others, only one represented B. R. Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation and another its sister organisation, the Kshatriya Samiti of the Rajbansis; an 'Independent' candidate also later supported the Federation, while the remaining seat went to a Communist. It was not that the non-Congress Scheduled Caste candidates did well in the primary election and then lost out in the general election in the two-tier electoral system under the Act of 1935. In the 30 reserved seats in Bengal, only 8 Federation candidates and 5 Kshatriya Samiti candidates could get past the primary election stage; in many constituencies there were no candidates from these organisations at all.[124] For those Scheduled Caste leaders who joined the Congress this meant a complete turnaround—

[124] Press Information Bureau, Govt. of India, 'The General Elections (1945–46), The Legislative Assembly—Bengal', 23 May 1946, Govt. of India, Reforms Office, File No. 106/3/45-R, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

a public retraction from a political stand maintained for more than three decades. But this recantation was perhaps rooted in the logic of their movement itself, which failed to imagine complete autonomy from the political nation as represented by the dominant Congress–Hindu Mahasabha combine in the complex days of the 1940s. When they acquired limited access to power—their longstanding demand—the time for their identification with the predominantly Hindu political nation seemed to have also arrived.

This process of incorporation was not, however, without its accompanying tensions and conflicts. As the Congress in Bengal tried to win over the Scheduled Castes, the Muslim League, by allying with some of their leaders, tried to strengthen its argument that Congress represented only the caste Hindus. The allegation might have been true to some extent, albeit in a different sense: while the Congress appropriated the majority of the leaders and itself became the champion of a reservation policy, its popularity among the dalit masses in the countryside was difficult to measure and was presumably very low. But on the eve of Partition, when the Congress–Hindu Mahasabha combine raised the demand for a Hindu homeland in West Bengal, the movement attracted significant dalit participation at the grassroots level. Haunted by the spectre of Muslim domination in East Pakistan—a fear that Hindu Mahasabha had successfully hammered into popular consciousness—the dalit emotionally identified with the dominant Bengali Hindu identity.[125]

The dalit peasants in Bengal around this time were indeed caught in contradictory political crosscurrents. In the election of 1946 many of them voted for the Congress, although 1905 onward they had been consistently shying away from the Congress-led mass movements. Now, they also responded positively, and in certain areas overwhelmingly, to the Hindu Mahasabha appeal for greater Hindu militancy and its demand for a separate Hindu homeland. This certainly signified their incorporation into the larger social space of the Hindu community. But paradoxically, around the same time, in 1946–47 they also participated in northern and eastern Bengal in the more class orientated tenants' and sharecroppers' movement, known as the Tebhaga movement, under direct Communist leadership and thus tended to shift away from caste and religious allegiances to more direct class affiliations. Such involvements on the part of the dalit peasants therefore clearly showed that their protest against the

[125] See chapter 5 for details.

dominant Hindu power structure ended either in their co-option into that same power configuration or their movement into the other more direct option of class conflict.[126]

These nuances in their political action, however, made little difference to their identification with the emergent Indian nation in 1947, notwithstanding the fact that the conditions of their citizenship in the post-colonial state—a political demand which they had been articulating since the early twentieth century—were yet to be satisfactorily addressed. In the 1940s, in the crucial last days of the Raj, as Gyanendra Pandey has argued, all other political parties, including the Hindu Mahasabha, the Communists and the Kisan Sabhas which they dominated, acknowledged the legitimacy of the Congress as the authentic representative of the nation.[127] The dalit organisations in Bengal were no exception to this, and for them in that particular historical conjuncture the Muslims appeared to be the more significant 'Other', than the caste Hindus. There is weighty evidence to suggest that a sizeable section of the dalit in Bengal shared the imagination of this new territorial nation: this is clear from their articulate participation in the Partition campaign, in their migration to West Bengal after the Partition and in their mentalities of alienation in post-Independence East Pakistan.[128]

This story of the redefinition of the nation and its territorial limits in 1947 should not, however, be misunderstood as a simplistic narrative of integration of the Hindu society. It did not mean that all the conflicts and tensions in that society were resolved, for this Hindu nationalist discourse was inclusive, but not integrative. And even that inclusion was nominal, rather than substantive. In this Hindu order of society, the dalit and the adivasi were to be incorporated, but assigned a fixed place in a hierarchical structure of relationships. This incorporation, therefore, did neither alter nor threaten the basic power structure of Bengali Hindu society, which ensured the dominance of the upper castes. The dalit were co-opted into and subordinated by this power structure, which thus maintained its ideological hegemony even within the structures of the modern nation state. It is in this reinvented political caste system that we can detect the

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[126] For details on post-1937 dalit politics, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal, 1937–47', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1994.

[127] Gyanendra Pandey, 'Introduction', in *The Indian Nation in 1942* (Calcutta: 1988), pp. 7–8.

[128] See chapter 5 for more details.

survival of Indian cultural difference, resisting, adapting and securing a niche for itself within the epistemological space marked by the normality of a totalising rationalist modernity. It was a difference that rested on asymmetrical relations of power. It was by no means a harmonious moral order that could be projected as the Indian opposite to an oppressive bourgeois society troubled by class conflicts. It is in this reinvented caste that political modernity has Indianised itself. And within this political structure of modern India, in the absence of a systemic change, it is difficult to imagine the dalit getting unimpeded access to power, except through alliance with or as a concession from the established power elites—either the 'sacred Brahmans' or the 'socialist Brahmans'—to use dalit publicist V. T. Rajshekar's metaphor in a slightly different way.[129]

[129] Quoted in G. Omvedt, 'The Anti-caste Movement and the Discourse of Power', in N. G. Jayal (ed.), *Democracy in India*, p. 505.

2

Caste and Popular Religion

Revolt against Hierarchy and its Limits

I

The hierarchical ideology of caste has been most vigorously contested in the realm of 'popular' religion, which is often defined through 'a process of exclusion'[1] as the 'other' religion. It is discursively positioned in an oppositional relationship to the established religion of the elite, which is supposed to represent the classical tradition, legitimated by the ancient texts. This ascription of an essential residual character to popular religion is the result of an unconscious acceptance of the elitist stereotyping of certain practices and beliefs as 'popular' or not conforming to the accepted ethical and moral standards or epistemological norms of the elite. Thus, 'popular' religion is believed to be something, which the elite do not subscribe to or have discarded as being too plebeian or typical of the subordinate classes. This inevitably leads to the conception of popular religion in an oppositional form: it is regarded as a religion which developed from among the people and which was constructed in resistance to the ideology of the elite. Such definitions of popular religion thus also assume its permanent disjunction from the religion of the elite, discounting possibilities of interaction and mutual interchange of ideas between the two streams. This assumption of an essential and

[1] David Hall, Introduction, in S. L. Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to Nineteenth Century* (Berlin: 1984), p. 6.

impermeable autonomy of popular religion does not however stand the test of scrutiny.

In its 'wider sense', popular religion 'means quite simply the religion of the vast mass of people; popular in the sense of its "widely favoured"', and it incorporates also its 'narrower usage', that of religion as an 'oppositional form'.[2] If we look at popular religion from this perspective, we may often find that much of popular religious beliefs and practices were actually rooted in or derived from what may be described as the religion of the establishment. In a hierarchical society the upper orders sought to extend their hegemony over the rest of society by prescribing certain moral—ideological standards, which set the limits to the imagination of the masses. The latter began to conform, sometimes consciously, though helplessly, and sometimes unknowingly, as the normative structures of the elite culture became a part of their quotidian experiences beyond which they could not think. We therefore often come across situations that may prod us to doubt the putative distinction between 'elite' and 'popular' cultures or religions. This shaping of popular culture was obviously a process of unequal cultural exchange based on asymmetrical power relations, but it was also a two-way process, as the classical religion also absorbed elements from folk religions and became 'folklorised'.[3]

However, popular religion is not always conformist in all its aspects. As Natalie Davis has argued, people are not always passive recipients of the values of their social superiors; they also adapted and redefined them in their own way.[4] Through this process of 'creative appropriation'[5] popular religion developed its subversive edge. Popular religion in this way reflected the social protest of the subordinate classes against their social superiors and their ideologies of domination. But, as we shall argue in this chapter, this subversion could never proceed to its fullest extent to offer or establish an alternative universal religion. These moments of protest thus set the normality of domination into sharper focus. Religion fulfilled certain functional as well as emotional needs of the people. It helped them

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[2] Barry Reay, 'Popular Religion', in B. Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth Century England* (London: 1988), p. 91.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 11.

[4] Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Some Themes and Tasks in the Study of Popular Religion', in C.Trinkaus and H. A. Oberman (eds), *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (Leiden: 1974), pp. 308–09, 313.

[5] Roger Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France', in Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture*, p. 235.

absorb the shocks and tensions of everyday life, in certain cases also to define and assert their self-image and in so doing, provided them with an ideology of protest. But as this self-image was usually defined within the overall context of the established social milieu, the protest itself was ultimately co-opted into the hegemonic order. And it was religion again which legitimised and smoothened this process of accommodation and absorption.

Alternatively, hegemony however absolute and totalising it may be, does not foreclose all spaces for autonomy and resistance. In every society, as Raymond Williams has argued, there is space for 'alternative and oppositional' views, which are tolerated and accommodated as they do not, at least not openly, challenge the fundamentals of the 'effective and dominant culture'. What goes on in society is a continuous process of selection through which 'some of these meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture.' And those, which cannot be assimilated into this 'emergent' culture, are often designated as 'residual culture', and are confined to closed circles of individuals or small groups. However, this toleration of opposition depends on the historical contingency, particular power relations in a society and the specific threat perceptions of the dominant culture. Through this process of accommodation, suppression and acculturation, Williams argues, 'the dominant culture itself changes, not in its central formation, but in many of its articulated features.'[6]

Popular religion, to borrow an expression, is thus 'at the same time both acculturated and acculturating'; it is neither radically different from the religion of the elite, nor can it be completely moulded by it. It is 'a mixture, whose constituent elements', derived from both folk and classical traditions, 'weld together indissolubly'.[7] In this chapter we will illustrate this by closely examining the concepts, rituals and the epistemological shifts over time in a number of minor religious sects that developed in Bengal since the late eighteenth century as a part of the continuing tradition of *bhakti*. These are important, as Partha Chatterjee has argued, as they provided for the lower castes and the dalit an autonomous space where they could contest the hegemony of the Vedic-Brahmanical *dharma*, which

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[6] Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', in C. Mukerji and M. Schudson (eds), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: 1991), pp. 414–20.

[7] Roger Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation', p. 233.

sustained and legitimised the ideology of a caste hierarchy based on the concepts of purity and pollution. However, Chatterjee has also observed in their history their ultimate 'failure to construct an alternative universal to the dominant dharma', which he thinks, was 'the mark of [their] subalternity'.[8] We will further investigate this interrogation and its 'failure' and relate it to the process of cultural hegemony that we have delineated above.

II

The Bhakti movement, which is supposed to have seriously challenged the social supremacy of the Brahmans, and the hegemony of the *varnashram dharma* in Bengal, was started in the sixteenth century by Sri Chaitanya (1485–1533) and his disciples. Chaitanya was not a social reformer in the modern sense of the term, trying to bring equality to a hierarchised Hindu society. Nor was his an exclusive movement of the lower orders, as many of his disciples came from the higher castes, including many Brahmans. His teachings, however, had radical social implications. He was a religious leader whose avowed goal was to bring spiritual salvation to all, both high and low, through the doctrine of simple devotion to Krishna within the Vaishnavite tradition. But instead of Brahmanical rituals, his prescribed path was the collective singing of devotional songs or *kirtan*, a tradition, which existed in Bengal long before Chaitanya. But he popularised it and turned it into a weapon of mass religious movement. As people high and low gathered in assemblies and sang and danced together in an ecstatic mood marked by the uninhibited outpouring of spiritual emotion, social distinctions were forgotten. Chaitanya never made any distinction between his devotees on the basis of their social background. The congregational singing of *kirtan*, in other words, had a great leveling effect and it also nurtured among the participants a sense of collectivity and camaraderie. At times of calamity, as Hitesranjan Sanyal tells us, the people in Bengal often resorted to singing *kirtans*, which gave them the confidence to face adversities in a collective spirit.[9] Chaitanya in his preachings at

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[8] Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Subaltern Consciousness', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: 1989), p. 185.

[9] Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Bangla Kirtaner Itiihas* (Calcutta: 1989), pp. 20–30, 38–46, 240–46.

Nabadwip, his birthplace in the Nadia district of Bengal, privileged the emotion of servility or *dasyabhava* the 'mood of a servant of the Lord'. When everyone irrespective of social origin is regarded as a servant of God, it creates what Ramakanta Chakravarti would prefer to call an environment of 'spiritual democracy'.[10]

Personally, Chaitanya never hesitated to visit the houses of the Sudras and Chandalas, and he believed that what qualified a man to become a guru was not whether he was a Brahman or a Sudra, but whether he had attained the knowledge of Krishna. But apart from that, Chaitanya never attempted a frontal attack on the *varnashram dharma*, while on the contrary, 'from the social point of view', as Edward Dimock writes, he left the caste question quite open, never defying its strictures in any public confrontation with the Brahmanical establishment. When on one occasion his low caste disciple Haridas, a convert from Islam, opted to dine separately, for fear of offending other high caste disciples, Chaitanya did not object to it.[11] Yet, Chaitanya's movement had serious subversive implications for the hierarchical ethos of Hindu society and therefore it invited the wrath of the power elite of the Hindu orthodoxy—the Raja—pundit nexus, as we defined them in the previous chapter. His major adversaries were the Brahman *smarta* pundits of Nabadwip, and their patrons, the Muslim Kazi, and later the Raja of Krishnanagar, whose concerted opposition ultimately forced him to retire to Puri in Orissa, where he spent his last days in esoteric search for personal salvation in an ultimate union with Krishna.

After Chaitanya's death, his message was variously interpreted by his disciples and the Vaishnava movement in Bengal began to pull in different directions. He certainly became a deity, thought to be an incarnation of Krishna, and was worshipped by his devotees from various emotional (*bhava*) standpoints. Some thought that in order to be accepted as authentic his teachings needed to be related to the Vedic and Upanishadic traditions. The *sada* or six Goswamis of Vrindaban thus accomplished the task of 'tying' Bengal Vaishnavism 'into the orthodox traditions of Indian religion',[12] thereby seeking to

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[10] Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1985), pp. 60–61; Ramakanta Chakravarti *'Gaudiya Vaishnavdharmer itihas'*, in Abantikumar Sanyal and Asoke Bhattacharya (eds), *Chaitanyadeb: Itihas o abadan* (Calcutta: 2001), p. 202.

[11] E. C. Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaishnava–Sahajiya Cult of Bengal* (Chicago, London: 1966), pp. 78–80.

[12] *Ibid*., pp. 71–72, 77.

appropriate a movement which in its inception clearly seemed to represent an alternative, if not oppositional, epistemological and theological position. And at this stage Vaishnavism also began to receive the patronage of some powerful zamindars, like the Rajas of Kheturi or Bishnupur and their retinues of pundits, some of whom were even converted to Vaishnavism.[13] But if *smarta*–Puranic orthodoxy began to creep in, the more radical tradition was also kept alive by Nityananda, an outstanding disciple of Chaitanya, and later his son Birabhadra, who continued to preach devotion through *dasyabhava* and *sakhyabhava* (a 'friendly mood' that spoke of 'fraternization with God') among the Sudras, some of the trading castes and the untouchables of Bengal.[14]

A reconciliation between the two camps took place at the Kheturi festival, which was organised sometime between 1610 and 1620, under the generous patronage of Raja Santosh Datta. It was here that the path prescribed by the Vrindaban Goswamis was accepted as the recognised doctrinal way to worship Chaitanya as the dual incarnation of Krishna and Radha, and the compromise *manjaribhava* (the devotional attitude of Krishna's female milkmaid attendants) was evolved to replace both the *dasyabhava* and *sakhyabhava* preached by Nityananda and his disciples on the one hand, and the more individualistic and esoteric *madhurabhava* (the erotic mood of supreme love and longing for union similar to that felt by Radha for Krishna) preferred by the Vrindavan school.[15] In the following years the disciples of Chaitanya in Bengal were organised into a syncretistic sect called the *Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampradaya*, which pulled together both the earlier liberal trends and the later *smarta*–Puranic canonical orthodoxy, and also sought to incorporate the *sahajiya* tradition, which already had significant influence on the lower orders of the society. But eventually this radicalism got overshadowed, as the sect evolved into an institution that was more a part of the established religious order of Bengali Hindu society. It was more attractive to the upwardly mobile middle ranking peasant and trading castes, like the Sadgops or Tilis, who saw in it a convenient way to legitimise their newly acquired social status and wealth.[16] As Chaitanya himself had

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[13] R. Chakravarti, *'Gaudiya Vaishnavdharmer itihas'*, pp. 207–08.
[14] R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, p. 143.
[15] R. Chakravarti, *'Gaudiya Vaishnavdharmer itihas'*, pp. 208–09.
[16] More details in H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1981), pp. 29, 58–59; Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Trends of Change in the Bhakti Movement in Bengal', Occasional Paper No. 76, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1985.

never directly spoken on the caste question, his later followers in the absence of a clear model to follow also took various positions. While Nityananda and his followers, many of whom had *sahajiya* leanings, continued to work among the lower castes and the untouchables, the more orthodox section, led by the Shantipuri Brahman Advaita Acharya and his followers, refused to admit such people into their sect.[17] Gradually this orthodox trend became dominant, as the Brahman gurus, threatened by the ever growing number of low caste converts, began to surround themselves with privileges and introduced caste rules and differentiation. Brahman devotees were given the place of prominence; while Sudras were still allowed to become gurus, they were no longer allowed to initiate any Brahman as their disciple. And the lower caste devotees were described as *Jat Vaishnava*, which now acquired a pejorative meaning of outcaste Vaishnavas.[18] The sect's previous image of irreverence and protest now began to erode through uninhibited appropriation of the symbols of order and orthodoxy, discrimination and domination. This new discriminatory spirit of differentiation is revealed clearly in an early twentieth century oral tradition from rural Bengal:

> *Neda nedi sabai bujhi? Emni matibhram,*
> *Vaishnavero uchunichu ache bhedkram*.[19]
> (They are all tonsured males and females, you think? That is an error; distinction between high and low exists among the Vaishnavas too.)

Ramakanta Chakravarti has described this process as the '"Sanskritisation" of *bhakti*' through which the Chaitanya movement was gradually incorporated into the established religious order as an alternative view that did not threaten, but indeed strengthened the dominant version of Hinduism. The Vrindaban school began to dominate mainstream Vaishnavism and its prescribed path of *baidhibhakti* or 'ritualistic devotion' sanctioned by the textual authority of the Haribhaktibilasa composed by Gopal Bhatta Goswami bore a close resemblance to ritualism, Brahmanism and the *varnashram dharma*. As Chakravarti writes:

> The social aim of the Vaishnava movement was [at this stage] deflected from the removal of caste distinctions towards the establishment of

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[17] Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, pp. 68–71, 78–81.
[18] R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 321–22, 333.
[19] Quoted in Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas* (Hooghly: 1333 B.S.), p. 329.

> social and ritual parity between the Vaishnava and the Brahmana. Vaishnavism was projected as a form of neo-Brahmanism, the aim of which was to revitalize the moribund Hindu society by lending substance to a neo-Brahmanical order, nurtured in *bhakti* ecstasy and, therefore, purer than the orthodox *smarta* order. The Vaishnavas were described as the new Brahmanas.[20]

However, while the mainstream Gaudiya Vaishnava order was thus appropriated, the more radical Sahajiya tradition continued to interrogate the ideology of *varnashram dharma* and the rituals of the Vedic-Brahmanical religion. To put it very briefly, the Sahajiya tradition owed its epistemological origin to *tantrik* Buddhism in Bengal. It discarded Brahmanical rituals, deplored the intellectualism of the learned theological debates, shunned the strict disciplines of orthodox Hinduism and preferred instead to follow nature (*sahaja*). As hunger and sexuality were natural human instincts, Sahajiya practice was to not repress them, but to travel through this easier path along the course of nature to arrive at a state of supreme joy (*Sahaja* or *Mahasukha)*. The Sahajiya path, though it included various yogic sexual practices, was not the path of licentious sexual indiscipline, but the path to conquer carnal desire in order to experience divine love. It was, as Sashibhusan Das Gupta describes it, 'a process of Divinisation of human love.'[21] However, the most important aspect of this tradition was its leanings towards social-spiritual egalitarianism. As Dimock puts it: 'The crucial point in considering the social attitudes of the Sahajiyas is the doctrine of "equality" or "sameness"…to a Sahajiya, a Brahman and an untouchable are the same. So are men and women.'[22]

This Sahajiya egalitarianism was gradually incorporated into the popular versions of Vaishnavism, while organised Gaudiya Vaishnavism was developing its image of a 'neo-Brahman order'. There developed in Bengal by the mid-eighteenth century a number of minor or deviant religious sects, which continued to interrogate the hegemony of the Vedic-Brahmanical religion as well as later Vaishnava orthodoxy. The latter condemned these oppositional sects and resorted to various forms of persecution. Totapuri, an eighteenth century south Indian orthodox Brahman Vaishnava pundit enjoying the generous patronage of Maharaja Krishnachandra, listed 13 such sects, the

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[20] R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, p. 322.
[21] Sashibhusan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: 1969), 51–53, 166.
[22] Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, p. 108.

boycotting of which he recommended.[23] But instead, people embraced them in great numbers and these sects proliferated causing a moral panic in the orthodox mind. Totapuri therefore expresses his concern:

> *Purbakale tero chhilo apasampraday,*
> *Tin tero barlo ebe dharma rakha day*.[24]
> (In olden times there were thirteen depraved religious sects; but their number has risen three times, making it difficult to maintain the religious order.)

So the question is, why did Totapuri think that the cherished moral order of his dharma was being put in jeopardy by these popular religious sects whose number in a short period of time rose from 13 to 39? And this proliferation did not even stop there, as Ramakanta Chakravarti gives us a 'check-list of fifty-six Vaishnava and semi Vaishnava heterodox sects' and admits that it is by no means 'exhaustive'.[25] We may try here to answer the question by exploring the social practices, ideas of cosmology and the epistemological world of some of these deviant religious sects.

III

The lower orders of the Vaishnavas, who were inspired by Nityananda and followed *raganugabhakti* or 'passionate devotion',[26] as opposed to the ritualistic *baidhibhakti* of the Gaudiya Vaishnava school, came to constitute by the eighteenth century a separate community known as the Jat Vaishnavas, or those who had renounced their *varna, gotra* and caste identities to become Vaishnavas.[27] They went through a simple ceremony of initiation (*bhek*) to join the casteless Vaishnava

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[23] *Aul baul kartabhaja nera darbesh sain,*
Sahajiya, sakhibhabaki smarta jat-gosain.
Ati badi churadhari gauranga nagari,
Tota kahe ei terror sanga nahi kari
(Aul, Baul, Kartabhaja, Nera, Darbesh, Sain, Sahajiya, Sakhibhabaki, Smarta, Jat Gosain, Churadhari, Gauranga, Nagari—Tota Says I do not keep contact with these thirteen)
Sudhir Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday aar tader gaan* (Calcutta: 1986), p. 6.

[24] *Ibid*., p. 10.

[25] R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal,* p. 348–50.

[26] S. Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. 66.

[27] For more details see Ajit Das, *Jatvaishnav Katha* (Calcutta: 1993), pp. 15, 40–42.

order that did not attach much importance to birth. Some of them remained householders (*grihee*), others became mendicants, who lived in communes (*akhra*), survived on begging (*madhukari*)—thus defying the occupational structures of caste stratification—and performed with their female companions the yogic sexual rites of the tantrik-Sahajiya tradition. Those who were converted and joined the ranks of the casteless Vaishnavas, came mainly, but not exclusively, from the lower orders of Hindu society—the unclean Sudra, *antyaja* and untouchable castes, as well as some of the tribals. Ramakanta Chakravarti has provided a list of 16 such castes and tribes whose main religion was Vaishnavism. This list includes the Baiti, Bhuimali, Dhoba, Doai, Dom, Gonhri, Jalia Kaibarta, Malo, Kandura, Pod, Rajwar, Sunri, Tiwar and tribes like Kora, Mahali and Oraons; to this may be further added the Namasudras. No wonder, the high caste Gaudiya Vaishnavas did not maintain any social relations with them and people like Bipin Chandra Pal described them as 'out-caste Vaishnavas'.[28] The dominant Hindu society often did not make any distinction between the householders and the mendicants—the notorious Vaishnava *gosains* or the Sudra gurus, who lived with their female spiritual consorts, practiced the erotic Sahajiya ceremonies and thus challenged the moral codes of the orthodox society. The major allegation therefore pertained to what was perceived as loose sexual morals—the Vaishnava order being the refuge of widows and fallen women and licentious men seeking illicit sexual gratification. In the 1870s in his *Bengal Peasant Life* Lal Behari Day narrated a story of how a helpless and abused widow was lured and tricked into the Vaishnava order, which came to be associated in popular Bengali sayings, as Day translates one of them, with the chanting of the name of Hari (Krishna) and enjoying the 'lap of spinster'.[29] J. N. Bhattacharya in the 1890s was even more cynical; about the followers of Chaitanya he writes:

> …they have in their society many ex-convicts, criminals…and persons who have been excommunicated by their castemen for unholy love-making. The ranks of the Chaitanites, as of many other sects, are

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[28] R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 330–33.

[29] 'No finer dish
Than broth of fish;
Nothing is sweeter
Than lap of spinster;
With joy all ye the name of Hari shout.'
Lal Behari Day, *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874, reprint, Calcutta: 1969), pp. 155–60.

> swelled also by bachelors and widowers unable to get a bride for marriage in orthodox form.
>
> The Chaitanite nuns are recruited chiefly from the superannuated unfortunates of the towns. The order is joined also by some of the unchaste widows of the lower classes.[30]

The lower caste Vaishnavas outside the pale of the established Gaudiya Vaishnava order thus came to be portrayed as a group of social rebels who did not observe the rules of caste distinction or the norms of female chastity or the sanctity of marriage that was the bedrock of caste. However, in the end Hindu society also managed to appropriate this heterodoxy as the Jat Vaishnavas ended up by forming a new caste—the caste of the outcastes (*jat khuiye Vaishnav*), who indeed began to practice endogamy among themselves and some of them even followed the Hindu rituals of marriage. Enumerated separately as a 'caste' in the 1881 census, their number stood at 568,052 in Bengal.[31]

The Bauls who belonged to the Sahajiya Vaishnava tradition, but also derived ideas from Sufi mysticism, posed an even greater oppositional challenge to organised Hinduism. They did not constitute an organised sect, by any conventional definition of the term, as they represented a myriad views and theological positions. Significant studies have been done on their philosophy and religious practices,[32] and it is not intended here to revisit those debates. We may only mention here some of the features of the Baul tradition, where they seriously interrogated the orthodox religious order and its teleology of caste hierarchy. Instead of other-worldliness, the Bauls believed in this world; instead of abstract metaphysical spiritualism they inculcated a materialistic philosophy; and instead of degrading or denouncing women, they preferred the Sahajiya yogic sexual practices where women became equal partners in spiritual experimentation.[33] They did not search for God through abstract contemplation, but discovered in the human body a microcosm for the universe (*'bhandake*

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[30] J. N. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects* (1896, reprint Calcutta: 1968), p. 369.

[31] A. Das, *Jatvaishnav Katha*, pp. 14, 17, 42.

[32] For some recent discussion see, Jeanne Openshaw, 'The Web of Deceit: Challenges to Hindu and Muslim Orthodoxies by Bauls of Bengal', *Religion*, vol. 27, 1997; Hugh B. Urban, 'The Politics of Madness: The Construction and Manipulation of the 'Baul' Image in Modern Bengal', *South Asia*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999.

[33] See, Saktinath Jha, *Bastubadi Baul* (Calcutta: 1999), chapter 5.

janile jani brahmander tattva') and searched here for their 'man of the heart', which meant the 'realisation of Sahaja or the ultimate nature of the self'.[34] The Bauls, therefore, tried to conserve the power of the body by taking back its matter through *chari-chandra* (four moons) *sadhana* or partaking of menstrual blood, semen, urine and faeces. Thus they not only overturned the epistemological world of Hinduism; they challenged seriously the notions of purity and the behavioural norms of established Hindu society. And this explains the severe criticism they faced from the elite of the Hindu social order. Ramakrishna described their path as entering the house through the toilet! And if such intellectual critiques were less harmful, there were more direct attempts to physically and socially persecute the Bauls in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, although Baul songs, simply because of their enchanting lyricism, are even today an integral part of Bengal's rural culture. But it was this violent opposition from the social establishment that drove the Bauls into their well-developed web of secrecy: their songs were written in an enigmatic *sandhya bhasa* or a language that was open to various interpretations, and their *guhya sadhana* or secret spiritual practices were only performed in the privacy of their *akhras* away from the eyes of the uninitiated.[35] The Bauls thus constructed for themselves a secluded space where they could enjoy their spiritual autonomy without openly defying the hegemony of the established Hinduism or the Shariat.

Close to the Baul tradition, but somewhere at the borders between the two organised religions of Hinduism and Islam stood the Fakirs,[36] the most important figure among them in the religious history of Bengal being Lalan Shah (c.1774–1890). In the Kusthia region in the early nineteenth century, he had effectively contested the hegemony of orthodox Islam and Hinduism and attracted through his popular songs the attention of many Hindus and Muslims irrespective of their social origins. He was born in a Kayastha family, but was abandoned by his kin because he had small pox. He was rescued, nursed and saved by a Muslim fakir. Lalan's philosophy, as it survives through numerous songs that he composed, offered an eclectic spiritual vision, combining the dualism of the Vaishnavas and the mysticism of

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[34] For more details see S. Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, pp. 141–42, 173–76.

[35] For more details see Saktinath Jha, 'Cari-Candra Bhed: Use of the Four Moons', in R. K. Ray (ed.), *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal* (Calcutta: 1995).

[36] Sometimes, even in scholarly articles, the two terms, Baul and Fakir, are used synonymously.

the Sufis while rejecting the dominance of both the Shariat and the Smarta-Puranic scriptural Hinduism. Lalan located his self-identity at an amorphous boundary between Hinduism and Islam, as one of his popular songs declares:

> *Sab loke kay Lalan ki jat e sansare*
> *Lalan bhabe jatir ki rup dekhlamna ei najare.*
> (Every body asks about Lalan's *jat* (here *jat* is used to mean religious identity, rather than caste); but Lalan feels that his vision has failed to figure out what *jat* really looks like.)

Lalan's religion was, therefore, beyond the specifics of the scriptures or fixed religious identities; it speaks of renunciation, abstention from sexual pleasures and invokes the merit of devotion as a path to spiritual salvation. It privileges the primacy of the *murshid* or guru, and as another of his famous songs indicates, makes no caste distinctions:

> *Jat na gele paine Hari*
> *Ki chhar jater gaurab kori*
> *Chhunsne boliye.*
> *Lalan kay jat hate pele*
> *Puratam agun diye.*
> (I cannot reach God (Hari) unless I lose my caste; then why do I take pride in my caste and say do not touch me? Lalan says if he could get caste in his hands, he would burn it in fire.)

It is no wonder, therefore, that at the time of his death Lalan had about 10,000 disciples. But although his songs have been immortalised, partly due to the interest taken by the more urban literary elites like Rabindranath Tagore himself, his followers could not form themselves into an organised sect, primarily due to internal dissention among his disciples after his death. Another factor of course was the concerted opposition of the orthodox society, which felt threatened and raised allegations of indiscipline and immoral sexual behaviour and mounted various acts of repression.[37]

If Lalan Shah could not initiate a new sect—partly because his own search for the 'man of the heart' was more esoteric, individualistic and secluded—another fakir in east Bengal was more successful in his organised effort to interrogate the established social hierarchies. Sahlal Pir was born sometime around 1700 in rural east Bengal and

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[37] For details on Lalan and the songs, see Sudhir Chakrabarti, *Bratya Lokayata Lalan* (Calcutta: 1992).

attracted around him followers from among both the Muslims and the Hindus, the majority of whom were the low caste Namasudra peasants. After his death in c.1805, the sect developed further under his three sons. What Sahlal Pir preached was a simple gospel of personal devotion (*bhakti*) and spiritual emotionalism (*bhava*) and the disciples were admitted into the sect through an uncomplicated ceremony of initiation, which undermined the importance of birth, privileged in the orthodox Hindu social order. This order was further challenged in the acceptance of the primacy of guru or *murshid*, who mediated between God and the disciples and commanded the latter's total spiritual subjection. While it eliminated priestcraft and rituals on the one hand, it ensured on the other a complete social equality among the followers, as everyone was required to visit the pir's *dargah*, pertake of *sinni* and drink water that had touched his feet. In this way, as one *murshida* song indicates, the disciples had to relinquish their pride in their caste and lineage (*'tor bazare aisyare amar gelo jati kulre'*). As a modern chornicler of the sect noted, the *murshida* songs that are sung even today in rural Bangladesh, proclaim the glory of humanity.[38]

Their dictum *'murshid satya'* (truth is the preceptor) was taken up by another local religious sect called Darbesh Sai Sampraday formed in the Dacca region in the mid-nineteenth century by a man called Udaychand Karmakar. But more generally, the primacy of the guru (instead of the Brahman priests) and the custom of collective singing of *kirtans* or devotional songs (instead of the chanting of Sanskrit mantras) figured prominently in the practices of all other deviant religious sects that sprang up in rural Bengal in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And if the Bauls and Fakirs remained at the fringes of settled Bengali peasant society, these deviant sects had significant influence on the householder population, and therefore constituted a greater threat to the established social order. Hindu orthodoxy considered them plebeian and heretical as their philosophical constructions were 'totally antithetical to the tenets of Gaudiya Vaishnava dharma',[39] which was by now appropriated into the dominant religious order.

The most influential among these sects was the Kartabhaja sect that developed its major centre at Ghoshpara in the Nadia district in the eighteenth century. The sect was started by Fakir Aulchand,

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[38] Jasimuddin, *Murshidagaan* (Dacca: 1977), pp. 36–42, 259, 262.

[39] See M. Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas*, pp. 399, 403–05.

'a semi-historical figure', as Ramakanta Chakravarti describes him, belonging to the Qadiri order of Sufis.[40] Around 1756 he came to Ghoshpara and initiated a Sadgop landholder Ramsharan Pal and 21 one other disciples, who constituted the 22 original followers of the sect, or the *'bayish fakir'* as they were known, belonging to various castes. Eventually Ramsharan emerged as the 'Pope' of the sect and as the legends go, was believed to have acquired miracle working powers of curing diseases and giving life to the dead. But it was under his wife Saraswati Devi, who came to be known as the *Satimata* (The Chaste Mother) and her son Dulalchand (1775–1832/33) that the sect grew in size and influence, claiming no less than 400,000 followers. It was Dulalchand who composed songs that encoded the theology of the Kartabhaja movement. The collection of these songs, published in 1881 as *Bhaber Gita*, expresses in the day-to-day commercial metaphor of the market and company—the mystic *tyankshali bol* or the 'language of the mint' devised by Dulalchand—an agonistic philosophy that contested the orthodoxy of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and offered an eclectic vision, described by Ramakanta Chakravarti as 'partly Gaudiya Vaishnava and partly Sahajiya', but also drawing elements from Islam and Christianity. We need not go here into the specifics of this theology, which Chakravarti has discussed in detail.[41] But two things can be emphasised as they are pertinent to the questions that we have raised.

First, the Kartabhajas looked at themselves as an oppositional religious order, and this opposition was derived from and enmeshed in their social and political subjection. In *Bhaver Gita*, Gaudiya Vaishnavism is referred to as the Big Company, controlled by rich kings and emperors and their greedy managers who exploited the poor porters. It was because of their greed that the Old Company became bankrupt and on its ruins grew up the New Company. The metaphor in no uncertain terms draws parallels between the religious oppression of the orthodox school of Gaudiya Vaishnavism and the political subjection and economic exploitation perpetrated by the East India Company, which were integral to the lived experiences of the Bengali villagers.[42] Second, as the sect made no distinction of caste and offered the prospect of spiritual liberation, it attracted followers from

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[40] R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, p. 353, see chapter XX for a detailed discussion on the Kartabhaja sect.

[41] *Ibid*., p. 378.

[42] See Hugh B. Urban, 'The Poor Company: Economics and Ecstasy in the Kartabhaja Sect of Colonial Bengal', *South Asia*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1996, pp. 1–33.

all castes and established religions, but more particularly from among the labouring poor of rural Nadia and urban Calcutta. As *Somprakash* noted in the mid-nineteenth century: 'This religion holds sway particularly among the *itar* [low class] people. According to Hindu scriptures… they do not have any freedom… but in the *Kartabhaja* religion they enjoy great freedom.'[43] Muslims, Brahmans, Sudras and the untouchables all attended their regular religious congregations. 'Every distinction of caste ceases at these nightly meetings', noted an early nineteenth century missionary observer, 'the Brahmin is sitting in brotherly fellowship by the side of a Sudra and the Mahomedan. They break bread together and a cup passed round the circle, from which all are drinking.'[44] The established norms of untouchability, commensality and social interaction are thus flouted in an act of deliberate defiance. There is thus little at which to be surprised when subsequently we find orthodox Brahmanical society taking up cudgels against the Kartabhajas; stereotyping their religious meetings as congregations of the sexually debauched and prostitutes; and Dasarathi Ray comparing their guru with a dog or a ghost that frequents the cremation grounds. Yet, this could not dent the popularity of the sect, as *Somprakash* reported an attendance of about 65,000 people at the annual Kartabhaja fair at Ghoshpara in 1864.[45] The hysterical reaction of Hindu orthodoxy only confirms the threat posed be the Kartabhaja movement, at least initially, to the constituted social order and its dominant ideology.

However, the eclectic Kartabhaja theology could not satisfy the more radical Sahajiyas, particularly as it discarded the concept of *parakiya* (extramarital) love of Krishna in favour of *swakiya* (marital) love. Some of the dissidents from this group, therefore, formed a number of deviant orders;[46] one of which was the Sahebdani sect that developed in the Nadia district in the eighteenth century, of which we now have significant information because of the painstaking field research of Sudhir Chakrabarti.[47] The sect, as he tells us, originated in the Saligram region of Nadia district in the eighteenth

[43] Quoted in Hugh B. Urban, 'The Poor Company', p. 13.

[44] Quoted in G. A. Oddie, 'Old Wine in New Bottles? Kartabhaja (Vaishnava) Converts to Evangelical Christianity in Bengal, 1835–1845', in G. A. Oddie (ed.), *Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia* (Richmond, Surrey: 1997), p. 65.

[45] Sudhir Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday Tader Gaan* (Calcutta: 1985), p. 30.

[46] R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, p. 384.

[47] For the following details on the Sahebdhanis, see S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday.*

century. Legend has it that, either a woman or a Muslim might have started the sect, its main guru, however, was one Muliram or Mulichand Pal, a Gop or cowherd by caste. It was under his second son Charan Pal (1740–1870) that the sect achieved its organisational cohesion and popularity, and had its main centre established at a village named Brittihuda on the banks of the river Jalangi. After his death Charan Pal's main disciple Kuber Gosain became the principal composer of Sahebdhani songs that became the conduits for the dissemination of the sect's philosophy. In short, like other minor sects, it too offered an eclectic epistemology constructed through the selective appropriation of aspects of Sufism, Sahajiya Vaishnavism and Christianity, but which consciously rejected organised orthodoxy. It made no distinction between Hindus and Muslims and at its religious gatherings flouted the restrictions on commensality and social exchange. It also did not respect caste hierarchy[48] and gender differentiation and jettisoned Hindu rituals, for example, the followers instead of cremating, buried their dead. On the other hand, it also followed the Tantrik–Sahajiya tradition of *chari-chandra sadhana* and the *parakiya sadhana* of yogic sexual rituals. But these were not prescribed for everybody, as this difficult path of accepting sexuality in order to transcend sexual desire required rigorous spiritual discipline and the guidance of the guru whose primacy was supreme in Sahebdhani belief system. However, this aspect of Sahajaiya *parakiya sadhana* also imposed a veil of secrecy on the sect and this to some extent restricted its reach, and later contributed to its marginalisation.

By contrast the Balahadi or Balarami sect, which also emerged in Nadia in the late eighteenth century, positioned itself more directly not just against the Vedic-Puranic orthodox Hinduism and its *varnashram dharma*, but also against the concepts of *parakiya* love and the orgiastic rituals of Sahajiya Vaishnavism and its primacy of

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[48] As one of their songs laments:

Sristikarta je hok bate
Nabadwipe Gaurrupe sakal jat chhete
Karlen ekchete
Se ek manlamna.
Tini Hindu Musalmaner guru jeneo
Biswas korlamna.
(Whoever may be the Creator, he appeared as Gaur in Nabadwip, eliminated all caste distinctions to unite all of them; but I did not accept it! Even knowing that he is the guru of both the Hindus and Muslims, I did not put my trust in him). S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, p. 145.

gurudom. The sect derived its name from its initiator, Balaram Hadi, who was born into the Hadi or scavenger caste, a stereotypical untouchable caste of Bengal, in around 1780 in village Meherpur in Nadia district. He was employed as a guard in the household of the Mullicks, an influential family in the area, who later accused him of theft and subjected him to a sound beating, leading to his disappearance from the village. Balaram then wondered around for some years, possibly meeting religious personalities, learning from them, and contemplating his own novel theory of cosmology. He eventually came back to Meherpur, now a changed and wiser person, and started his own religious sect. The local zamindar Jiban Mukhopadhyay donated a piece of land, where he started his ashram. Later, one of his principal disciples, Tanu Mandal, a Mahishya, took him to Nischintapur, a fishing village inhabited by the Namasudras, another dalit community of Bengal, and this place subsequently became the main centre of the sect. By around 1872 the sect had about 20,000 followers, belonging mainly to the untouchable and other lower castes, such as the Hadi, Dom, Bagdi, Muchi, Bede, Malo, Namasudra, Mahishya, and also the Muslims, spread over a wide region of western and northern Bengal, such as in the districts of Birbhum, Purulia, Burdwan, Nadia, Rajshahi, Pabna, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and even Calcutta.[49]

Partha Chatterjee has discussed in detail, using Sudhir Chakrabarti's field data, the radical implications of the Balahadi's novel theory of cosmology and how it provided a space for the subalterns to imagine their autonomy and resistance to the domination of dharma.[50] We need not go into that discussion again here. However, it will be pertinent to mention some of the points of departure that this particular sect and its belief system represented vis-à-vis the other minor religious sects belonging to the Vaishnava tradition. It repudiated, first of all, the primacy of the guru and the *parakiya* love of the Sahajiya tradition. The Balahadi sect was for the householders, who were supposed to follow only Balaram Hadi and no one else, and were instructed to maintain strict sexual discipline, even among married couples.[51] But what is most important, the sect not only rejected the

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[49] All the details on the Balahadi sect in this paragraph and below, if not otherwise mentioned, are from S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday*.

[50] See P. Chatterjee, Caste and Subaltern Consciousness', pp. 194–209.

[51] Balaram's instructions included that sexual intercourse except for procreation should be eschewed. Married couples may have coitus once a month, i.e., twelve times a year; but the frequency should be even less, if possible (*Mase ek bachhare baro, tar kame jatota paro*). S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday*, p. 109.

caste system,[52] it was consciously and openly anti-Brahman. As the legends go, Balaram openly ridiculed the Brahmans for their lack of wisdom, and constructed a creation theory which placed Hadiram at the top as the Supreme Creator, from whom originated the other powerful gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon; Chaitanya himself was represented as a reincarnation of Hadiram. In this genealogy, the Bengali Brahmans were thought to have been born of *Brisha* (oxen) and *Mesha* (sheep) and had in them the blood of their Bede and Bagdi mothers.[53] In this teleological construction of a theory of creation that placed the Hadi at the top, and located the Brahman on the same plane as the archetypal untouchables—the Bedes and Bagdis—we clearly detect an attempt to subvert, albeit in imagination, the established Hindu orthodox hierarchy of castes based on notions of purity and pollution. It is no wonder that its followers, unlike other minor sects, belonged almost exclusively to the *antyaja* and untouchable castes. It was only at a later phase that the sect came to be dominated by the Mahishyas, a socially mobile, clean-Sudra peasant caste. This put limits to its subversive edge, but that is a problematic we will visit later.

If all these minor religious sects mentioned above developed in the Nadia region, because of its closeness to the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya, the Matua sect, which also belonged to the Vaishnava tradition, emerged in east Bengal in the late nineteenth century. It was different from the other minor sects as it developed from and remained integrally connected to the organised social movement among the Namasudras, one of the most politically articulate dalit groups in colonial Bengal. I have discussed the Namasudra movement and the tenets of the Matua sect in detail elsewhere.[54] However, some discussion of its interrogatory character will not be out of place

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[52] As one of their songs go:

Taba jale pak anna
Bhed nai chhatris varna
E sansare aar ke pare Hadiram bhinna.
(Rice is cooked in your water, which makes no distinction between the thirty-sex castes. Who can do it except Hadiram?) S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday,* p. 150.

[53] S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday*, p. 97.

[54] For the following details on the Namasudra movement and the Matua sect, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872–1947* (Richmond, Surrey: 1997).

here. The sect was initiated by Harichand Thakur (1811/12–78) who was born in the Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur to a Vaishnavite peasant family of Namasudras—an amphibious dalit group that was emerging in the late nineteenth century as a settled peasant community colonising the marshy lands of southern Faridpur, northwestern Bakarganj, and the adjoining regions of Jessore and Khulna. It was under his son Guruchand Thakur (b. 1846) that the sect achieved its doctrinal cohesion and organisational push, as it came to be associated with the Namasudra social protest movement started in 1872. Though claimed as a 'new' religion, its tenets were selectively drawn from orthodox Hinduism and the bhakti tradition; but at the same time, it endeavoured to assert its oppositional stand vis-à-vis established orthodoxy, as the Namasudras, previously known as the Chandals of Bengal, also sought to affirm their new found social identity and self-respect.

Rejecting all Brahmanical rituals and the crowded Hindu pantheon, the Matua sect prescribed for its devotees a simple religion of personal devotion that did not require the mediation of a guru. As Harichand would say: 'all rituals, except devotion to God, faith in mankind, and love for living creatures, are distortions.' As Guruchand reiterated, there was no need for any other mantra, except *Harinam* or the name of Lord Hari or Krishna, and to learn this supreme syllable no initiation or dispensation was necessary. The sect, as their numerous songs make it clear, made no distinction of caste (*'matua sakale ek jatibhed nai')* and made no gender differentiation, as women participated as equal partners in the congregational singing of *kirtan*, the only ritual that the sect ever prescribed. But since the sect was integrally related to the social movement of the Namasudras, the collective singing of devotional songs performed other social purposes as well. It became a ritual to assert their political will, as the songs often contained messages for boosting self-confidence and the collective ego of a depressed community, whose members otherwise felt powerless to face the obstacles of life.

Such emotional needs of an upwardly mobile community were also reflected in other aspects of the Matua doctrine. The compulsion to achieve respectability made it distance itself from the allegations of sexual promiscuity often leveled against the Sahajiya sects. Both Harichand and Guruchand advised strict sexual discipline and family values for their householder disciples (*garhastya dharma*); but this did not mean treating women as obstacles to spiritual salvation. On the other hand, Guruchand very consciously opposed Sankarite Vedantism or the monistic philosophy of spiritual salvation, which

meant transcending the illusory world to attain the supreme truth or Brahma, who defied embodiment. For Guruchand, this other-worldliness, which was the quintessence of the Brahmanical dharma, was only a ploy to keep the toiling Sudra in a perpetual state of subjection, only dreaming of salvation in the next life. From this enslaving philosophy of despair Guruchand offered a way out by combining bhakti with karma or devotion with action. '*Hate kam, mukhe nam*' (doing worldly duties while chanting His holy name) became the guiding dictum of Matua philosophy. The sect, unlike other minor religious sects, thus preached a work ethic designed to motivate an upwardly mobile community still struggling under material and spiritual servitude. However, this was not a modernist capitalist ethic, as attaining self-respect, rather than profit or any other economic rationalist motivation remained the essence of the perceived Matua salvation.

IV

The minor religious sects, as it should be clear from the discussion above, were seriously interrogating the hegemony of the Brahmanical dharma, and more particularly its hierarchical ethos. However, we may now look at some of the features of the theology and praxis of these sects to understand also the limits of such contestation. These sects first rejected the two orthodox religions—Brahmanism, based on Vedic–Puranic scriptures, and Islam with its scriptural foundation in the Shariat, and the communal division that they entailed. This folk religious syncretism comes through in the songs of Lalan mentioned earlier. In the Balahadi sect Balaram was described as both Hadiram and Hadiallah, as his householder disciples came from both the communities. A song composed by Kuber Gosain of the Sahebdhani sect perhaps conveys this syncretism best in a superb phonetic metaphor: *Allah aljihbhay thaken apan sukhe, Krishna thaken takrate* (Allah stays happily at the tip of the tongue, while Krishna lives in the palate).[55] This statement implying an apparent lack of conflict in pronouncing the two names of God using two different parts of the mouth asserted, above all, a challenge to the orthodox religions, as the sect preached instead what may be called the religion of the man, based on a principle of equality irrespective

[55] S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, p. 65.

of caste and gender. Another song composed by Kuber Gosain further asserts:

> *Michhe kather chhabi matir dhibi Sakshigopal*
> *Bastuheen pashane keno matha thuke maro.*
> *Manushe korona bhedabhed*
> *Karo dharmayajan manushbhajan*
> *Chhere daore bed.*[56]
> (Why strike your head meaninglessly at bogus wooden pictures or powerless idols that are nothing but lumps of clay or pieces of stone? Do not make distinction between human beings, give up the Vedas and perform your religious duty by worshipping man.)

Nothing could be more dismissive of the orthodox religion of the Vedas, its hierarchic principles and idolatry. This humanism is most lyrically expressed in another Sahajiya Vaishnava song: *'Sunahe manush bhai savar upare manush satya tahar upore nai'*, which Sashibhusan Das Gupta has translated as 'Hearken men, my brothers—man is the truth above all truths—there is nothing above that.'[57] This humanistic religion further acquired a universalistic message in the teachings of the Matua sect. 'All human beings living in this world will be considered by me as belonging to one race', as Guruchand, the preceptor of the sect, once told the wife of an Australian Baptist missionary.[58] This man of the heart, as the Baul would call his God, was propitiated through devotional songs instead of Sanskrit mantras; and the Brahman priests were dispensed with in favour of the Sudra gurus. Some of these sects, like the Kartabhajas or the Sahebdhanis allowed women to become gurus as well; for others, women became equal partners in the spiritual journey towards salvation.

However, behind these deviant attitudes were also concealed the limits of defiance. The subversive potential of the bhakti movement and later of the deviant orders very obviously led to a violent reaction from the forces of orthodoxy. As mentioned already, Chaitanya himself incurred the wrath of the Nabadwip Brahmans. The local pundits and their young apprentices, patronised by the Raja of Krishnanagar, organised a boycott of Chaitanya's followers. Later the Sahajiyas and the Bauls were ostracised and persecuted in the name of *'pashandi dalan'* (suppression of the evil), and Muslim Fakirs challenging the sanctity of the Shariat were physically victimised by the orthodox

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[56] S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, p. 102.
[57] S. Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. 118.
[58] Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand-Charit* (Calcutta: 1943), p. 203.

Muslims.[59] As a natural response to this threat, much of which was direct and physical, the Sahajiyas and the Bauls also devised a strategy of defence. They interrogated and violated the hierarchical norms of Hindu society only in the secrecy of their nocturnal weekly meetings or in their secluded *akhras*, while outwardly conforming to the established social rules of caste and pollution during the day. The Kartabhaja followers were instructed to maintain a distinction between the two modes of behaviour—*vyavahara* and *paramartha*: in the former or social behaviour they were to abide by all the established norms of society, its rules of caste and rituals of the Brahmanical Puranic religion; but in the realm of the latter—in their quest for spiritual salvation—they were not to be bound by any established norms, but to follow their natural inclinations or *pravritti*. And such unabashed behaviour or exercise of freedom was only meant for their exclusive weekly gatherings.[60] This was, according to one scholar, a '"Janus-faced" attitude', a tendency to lead a 'double life'.[61] One was 'marked as a ground of inevitable compromise and surrender to the dominant norms of society', as Partha Chatterjee writes, 'and the…[other] the secret preserve of autonomy and self-assertion.'[62]

This defensive attitude and outward acceptance of the hegemony of the Brahmanical dharma and its hierarchical norms was not just peculiar to the Kartabhajas alone. The householder disciples of Lalan, members of the Sahebdani order, as also the followers of the more radical Balahadi sect, also lived a pragmatic double life.[63] Their songs were therefore composed in a deliberately confusing language that skilfully concealed the subversive message of their deviant epistemology. The Baul songs, it is true, became integral parts of rural folk culture, and, in recent years, even of urban popular culture, because of their commodification for the electronic entertainment market. But these songs did not necessarily communicate a message of social rebellion. As a recent field research indicates, these songs are popular more on account of their appealing tunes, rather than their messages, which, because of the ambiguity of the language used and the mystical allusions that they contain, remain unintelligible to most people.[64] So

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[59] S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, pp. 5–6.
[60] R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, p. 362.
[61] Urban, 'The Poor Company', p. 19.
[62] P. Chatterjee, Caste and Subaltern Consciousness', p. 194.
[63] A. Das, *Jatvaishnav Katha*, pp. 42–43.
[64] Sunit Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Mela utsaber darpane Banglar lokosahitya* (Calcutta: 1997), pp. 39, 175–76.

these sects did not in the end subvert the hegemony of the Brahmanical dharma, but created a secret space for imagined autonomy for the subaltern classes. The orthodox society tolerated this deviation as long as it remained on leash.

There are also some other aspects of these deviant orders that indicate their location within a discursive terrain informed by the dominant religious ideas and values. The poet Nabin Chandra Sen in 1895 regarded the Kartabhaja sect as nothing but a variation of the Hindu tradition of *'guru-puja'*, where the guru himself is worshipped instead of any other idol.[65] The concept of the mediation of guru to bridge the gulf between God and the disciples was later appropriated by Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which emphasised the role of *sikshaguru* and *dikshaguru*. Although eventually, Chaitanya himself came to be venerated as the *shikshaguru*, the role of the *dikshaguru* remained privileged, and became accessible only to the Brahmans. The minor religious sects sought to displace the primacy of the Brahmans by installing Sudra gurus in their place. But the latter's position was legitimised by imagining them as the *abataras* or reincarnations of Chaitanya himself. The Matuas consciously tried to reject *gurubad*, but some of their songs deify their Namasudra guru Harichand as the *abatara* of Hari or Krishna, and his son Guruchand as the dual incarnate of Hari and Siva, a notion drawn directly from Hindu and Gaudiya Vaishnava theology.[66] The Balahadis deviated from this tradition. They did not completely reject *abatarabad*, a familiar notion from Hinduism, but inverted it by claiming that Chaitanya and the other Hindu gods were themselves the *abataras* of Hadiram. In one narrative, however, Balaram is described as posing as Krishna during the *dol purnima* celebrations, and being worshipped by his disciples with flowers and other accessories, thus indicating a tendency towards his deification and appropriation into the Hindu pantheon. One song of the sect even mentions him as the 'guru' who gives the supreme syllable.[67] The influence of the values and practices of the dominant religious system was indeed difficult for the minor sects to resist. Popular imagination is often conditioned and restrained by the dominant culture, and popular devotion therefore seeks expression through familiar notions and icons, rather than radically different novelties.

It was not unnatural that the minor religious sects showed a lot of ambivalence and compromise in accepting, often tacitly, some of

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[65] Cited in S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, p. 32.
[66] For more on this see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 211–12.
[67] S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday*, pp. 21, 45, 99.

the dominant ethos of society, particularly as far as the caste question and the issue of hierarchy were concerned. If all these sects, as mentioned above, displaced the privilege of the Brahman gurus, they were replaced in most cases by clean Sudras rather than untouchables or dalits. It would be pertinent here to mention a few examples that illustrate this. The history of the Kartabhaja sect shows that the position of the *Karta* or the supreme guru of the sect went to Ramsaran Pal, a Sadgop (a clean Sudra peasant caste), and eventually this position became hereditary within his family. The initiator of the sect, Aulchand had 22 disciples, and of them four became most prominent. Apart from Pal, they belonged to three different castes, Goala, Kalu and Muchi. It is not difficult to hazard a guess as to why of the four Pal became so powerful; the answer perhaps lies in his connection with the local Sadgop zamindar family. The leader of the Sahebdhani sect Charan Pal also belonged to the Gop caste. And despite its apparent rejection of caste, the sect could not completely get away from popular veneration of the Brahmans. The annual celebration of their grand festival (*mahotsab*) that takes place every year at village Brittihuda, its main centre, involves the traditional Hindu ritual of *Brahman-bhojan*, that is, the ceremonial feasting of five Brahmans in the Pal household.[68]

Balaram of the Balahadi sect of course belonged to a lowly untouchable caste, the Hadi, and was most radical in rejecting the teleologies of caste. But after his death, Tanu Pal, a Mahishya (a middle peasant caste), became the *sarkar* or the supreme leader of the sect. Although the position of the *sarkar* was an elective one—a notable departure from the practices of the other sects—all the successive *sarkars* belonged to the Mahishya caste, which eventually came to dominate the sect. Being a socially mobile middle peasant caste, the natural tendency of the Mahishyas was towards a Sanskritising mode, and they began to tone down some of the more radical aspects of the sect's practices, particularly by reversing Balaram's rejection of the established life cycle rituals of Hinduism.[69] The Matua sect was initiated by Harichand and his son Guruchand belonging to the Namasudra caste, a socially mobile dalit group, but not as lowly as the Hadis. The Matuas also repudiated caste to begin with, but ended up in preferring the Sanskritising path. Guruchand himself put forth a claim of Brahmanhood for the Namasudras and spearheaded a public campaign that used *Manusmriti* and other

[68] S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, pp. 36, 55.
[69] S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday*, pp. 28, 98–100.

Hindu scriptures and a *vyavastha* from Brahman pundits to validate this claim. In the subsequent myths of the Matua sect, Harichand appears as a Brahman who had lost his caste by marrying a Namasudra woman. Nothing could be more endorsing of the hierarchical notions of Hindu society, Brahmans being venerated as the supreme beings and women the defiling agents.[70] This is a tendency shared by others as well. As a recent researcher suggests, even some of the Jat Vaishnavas, who had once denounced their caste to form this casteless caste, eventually began to claim Brahman status for themselves and preferred the services of Brahman priests in their life cycle rituals that are no different from those prescribed in orthodox Hinduism.[71]

Much of the popular attention drawn to these minor religious sects, we must remember, was not just because of their contestatory philosophy—indeed, very few of their devotees would be conscious of their oppositional nature. Yet, they flocked to these sects in thousands as they fulfilled many of their emotional needs. The rumours that floated around about the miracle working power of their gurus offer an important clue to understanding the appeal of these popular sects. To give some examples, Ramsaran Pal, the guru of the Kartabhaja sect, and his wife Satimata, were imagined to have been endowed with occult power that could bring back life to a dead man, cure all diseases, give sons to barren women and fulfill all wishes of the true faithful. The pomegranate tree and the goose pond at Ghoshpara, where the annual festival of the sect takes place every year in spring, are also believed to have such miraculous healing power that brings thousands of devotees every year. The Sahebdhani guru Charan Pal also appears in Kuber Gosain's songs as gifted with miraculous healing power to cure diseases. The Balahadis did not imagine any such magical therapeutic power for Balaram; but an early twentieth century narrative reports the existence of rumours that diseases were cured by eating Balaram's *prasad* at the Baruni mela at Meherpur.[72] This particular motif of miraculous curing power of the guru comes through more forcefully in the devotional songs of the Matua sect. The gurus, the songs assert, could give solace to all who sorrowed and bring the dead back to life; by keeping faith in Guruchand the hungry could get food, and the childless a son; by the grace of Harichand, the lame could dance, the blind could see and the dumb could sing the songs of Hari.[73]

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[70] For more details see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 45–49.
[71] A. Das, *Jatvaishnav Katha,* pp. 17, 63, 80–81, 90–91.
[72] S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday*, pp. 34, 64–67.
[73] S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 40.

Such imagining of the miraculous power of the guru was of course a cultural production arising from asymmetrical relations of power. This involved a process, which Bryan Wilson would call 'social endowment of power',[74] where the prophet personifies the unfulfilled wishes of the disciples and help them circumvent the obstacles of life. In other words, the guru, by virtue of being the *abatara*, and by inheriting the power of a higher authority—God—represented the power of the powerless. This is revealed more cogently in other images of divine power of the guru pitted against the more worldly power of the local oppressors. In Matua mythology, Harichand is imagined to have mastered the magical power not only of curing disease; he could also destroy the estates of a domineering Brahman zamindar or inflict a tyrannical *naib* or zamindari agent with leprosy.[75] As one of the Balahadi legends goes, when the zamindar of Nischintapur, jealous of Balaram's popularity, set fire to his ashram, the latter left the village, cursing the arsonist with dire consequences. He who has set fire to my ashram has destroyed his own home, Balaram is reported to have said. Then according to the legend, he reached Meherpur in just three steps, and it began to rain in Nischintapur. After nine days of incessant rain, the zamindari grain store caved in, leaving a big crater, and thus fulfilling the prophet's curse. These stories, however, represented not a mentality of open confrontation with the existing constellations of power, but a submerged desire for empowerment. Balaram himself restrained his disciples from open confrontation, his justification for this being the vast incompatibility of power. When one of his followers was badly beaten up by the local zamindar, he comforted him by saying: would you have complained if a tiger had attacked you?[76] The statement on the one hand expressed a reproach for the powerful and the oppressive, but also signified a sense of resignation, surrender and compromise. But more significantly, such religious messages acted as a soothing balm that relieved mental pain or emotional scars, caused by the physical distress that the poor suffered as a result of their powerlessness.

In some cases, however, the gurus themselves abused their power and took on an exploit ative role, thus paving the way for their marginalisation or incorporation into the constituted order. This exploitation took place at different planes. First, although the path of Tantrik—sahajiya yogic sexual rites of *parakiya* love was one of

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[74] B. R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millenium* (London: 1973), p. 499.
[75] S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 36.
[76] S. Chakrabarti, *Balahadi Sampraday*, pp. 71, 210–11.

self-control and ultimately of winning over the baser instincts of lust and desire to attain *sahaja* or the supreme spiritual joy, it became for many Vaishnava gurus a license for indulging in promiscuity. This involved the sexual exploitation of innocent women devotees, in many cases the helpless Hindu widows who were abused by their families and flocked to the Vaishnava *akhras* as their last refuge. The allegations that the Vaishnava orders were gatherings of licentious people were to some extent malicious stereotyping, but not entirely baseless, as Sudhir Chakrabarti argues.[77] No wonder, they were marginalised in course of time and were reduced to a peripheral existence at the margins of Hindu society.

Equally serious was the charge of extortion levelled against the gurus, an ideal example being the Kartabhaja sect itself. The sect replicated a hierarchical organisation, with the *Karta* at the top, the secondary level of gurus or *mahasays* at the middle, each in charge of a region, and the *baratis* or ordinary lay disciples at the bottom, providing the base of the pyramid. The position of the *Karta* became hereditary for Ramsaran Pal's family, who received from each *mahasay* half of their annual income, which was derived from the *baratis* who had to pay a fourth of their personal income. This levy was called *daihik khajana* or 'bodily revenue', based on the principle that *Karta* was the ultimate owner of the body of the disciple, and hence the latter had to pay for being allowed to live in it—a clever construction that much too closely looked like an appropriation of the feudal modes of exploitation legitimated by Cornwallis's zamindari system. Apart from this, there were several other fees that the *Karta* collected from his followers and this ensured a hefty income for Dulalchand and his sons, who constructed a princely mansion and lived a life of luxury and, as the allegations go, of licentious pleasure. It was not surprising that by the second half of the nineteenth century the sect had been discredited and became unpopular, leading to many of its rural followers converting to Christianity.[78]

V

We argued at the beginning of this chapter that the hegemony of a dominant dharma does not foreclose all space for alternative and/or

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[77] S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, pp. 39–40.

[78] See Urban, 'The Poor Company', pp. 27–32; R. Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 361–62; G. A. Oddie, 'Old Wine in New Bottles?', p. 68.

oppositional views, but contains and appropriates them through pressure and patronage, or marginalises them as residual culture. Indeed, many of these minor sects, despite their epistemological agnosticism, were actually patronised by a cross section of Hindu society, including its elite. To take one example, the Kartabhaja sect, its place of origin being near Calcutta, attracted the attention not just of the lower caste, urban working classes, but also of the wealthy merchant community and the educated Hindu *bhadralok*, many of them belonging to the three higher castes of Bengal. Rammohun Roy is known to have visited Ghoshpara; the poet Nabin Chandra Sen was impressed by the simple, eclectic and non-idolatrous religious message of the Kartabhajas. As the legend goes, Dulalchand received the title of 'Debmohanto' from the Raja of Nadia, while the Raja of Bhukailash was one of the patrons of the sect. Dulalchand, it is claimed, even received an invitation to the Religious Congress in Chicago in 1893—an invitation that arrived only after his death.[79] The situation only shows that some aspects of the Kartabhaja philosophy seemed to be an acceptable and even an appealing alternative worldview and hence could be appropriated by respectable Hindu society. But its other more objectionable or contestatory aspects, like the violation of the rules of caste and commensality or its yogic sexual practices were driven underground and could only be practiced in their nocturnal gatherings in the fashion of secret societies. In the same way, as Hugh Urban has argued, even the image of the Baul, whose antinomian life style was considered in the early nineteenth century to be the most virile threat to the constituted religious order and social discipline, was 'de-odorised and purified' and 'rehabilitated' by men like Rabindranath Tagore and Kshitimohan Sen, who regarded them as the quintessential symbol of rustic simplicity and beauty of the Bengali peasant culture. Eventually, in the nationalist imagination the image of the Baul was reinvented to represent the liberal and simple spiritualism of the Indian masses, as yet uncontaminated by the colonising West. Their objectionable sexual practices were conveniently ignored or re-interpreted as oddities or aberrations confined only to a corrupt few.[80]

The Matua sect offers a different story of appropriation and containment. As it was closely associated with the Sanskritising movement of a socially mobile caste, it simultaneously interrogated the

[79] S. Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, pp. 32–39.
[80] Hugh B. Urban, 'The Politics of Madness', pp. 31–39.

teleology of hierarchy and yet sought accommodation for the Namasudras in the caste hierarchy at a more exalted and elevated plane. As the Namasudras sought to define their new identity, they preferred to locate it within the familiar social terrain of Hindu caste formation and in order to do that they gradually absorbed the dominant values of that social order and the Matua sect provided a theological legitimation to such elitist reforms. As some of the later day songs of the sect indicate, not only had they internalised the patriarchal values of gender inequality, but also accepted the Vedantic notions of *maya* or the illusory world and the desirability of seeking spiritual salvation in the next world—the very notions that the sect's early gurus had rejected so forcefully as being a theory of despair that the Brahmans had designed to reduce the Sudras to perpetual subjection. As a result of this process of cultural absorption, the followers of the sect no longer saw any conflict between their being members of the sect and performing all the rites, rituals and pujas of Smarta—Puranic Hinduism. In other words, having lost its contestatory character, it was no longer looked at as an oppositional religion, and thus became absorbed into the organised life of the Hindu religious order.[81]

Thus, despite a long tradition of religious protest, the hegemony of the Brahmanical religion or legitimacy of the *varnashram dharma* could not be effectively subverted. The minor deviant religious sects were either appropriated into the established religious order, like the Kartabhajas and the Matuas, or were marginalised into secret survival, like the Sahebdhanis or the Balahadis, or were pushed into reinvented exotic existence like the Bauls. It is no wonder therefore that the lower castes, despite all disabilities, accepted the caste system as a fact of their quotidian life or as a part of their common sense. In the late nineteenth century, Herbert Risley found the Namasudras to be 'very particular as regards caste prejudices', never allowing 'a European to stand or walk over their cooking place.'[82] The situation only explains the frustration of Duddu Shah, a radical follower of Lalan Fakir, as he sings: *'Namasudra Muchi Bagdi/Tarao khonje jater siddhi'* (the Namsudras, Muchis and Bagdis [or the untouchables]—they too seek glory in caste!).[83] This tone of despair continues into the late twentieth century in the writings of Ajit Das,

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[81] For more details on this, see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 211–14.

[82] H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I (1891, reprint, Calcutta: 1981), p. 188.

[83] S. Chakrabarti, *Bratya Lokayata Lalan*, p. 173.

himself a Jat Vaishnava, seeking to explore the history of this socially radical religious movement. What he comes across is a story of compromise and a tendency to appropriate the symbols of Brahmanism. 'Jat Vaishnava families', as Das writes, 'are having Brahmans as their dikshaguru, and feeling proud of it. In the akhras the Babajis are donning the sacred thread. What is this but a declaration of defeat of the Jat Vaishnava movement?'[84]

However, this story of defeat does not make the history of resistance and autonomy less important; together they constitute the narrative of hegemony and explain why the caste system continues to this day in the social and political life of the Bengali Hindus. An important aspect of the social and cultural history of Bengal is that this phenomenon of continual contestation toned down the nature of domination of Brahmanism and reduced the intensity of the oppressive features of the caste system. The subordinate groups at the bottom accepted it as it also provided a space, although highly fenced or quarantined, but nevertheless a space for their limited enjoyment of freedom from subjectivity where they could feel equal to their superiors. To use Robert Gray's observation in relation to the theory of hegemony, the subordinate classes thus follow a 'negotiated version' of the ideology, values and culture of the elite. And on the other hand, the 'structures of ideological hegemony [also] transform and incorporate dissident values',[85] preventing them from realising their full subversive potential.

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[84] A. Das, *Jatvaishnav Katha,* p. 69.

[85] Cited in Tony Bennet, 'Popular Culture and the "Turn to Gramsci"', in J. Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Athens: 1998), p. 221.

3

Caste and Social Reform
The Case of Widow Remarriage

I

Social reforms in Bengal in the nineteenth century affected many aspects of human relations and existential realities, the most important of them being gender relations and conditions of women. How such conditions were changing imperceptibly in the quotidian life of the lower caste and dalit peasant women as a result of some grassroots level religious movements, we have already noted in the earlier chapter. We may now turn our attention to reforms from above, initiated by the educated, high caste, modernising *bhadralok*, and patronised by the colonial state. Why women particularly came under the focus of this rationalist-modernist-reformist project is a contentious issue that has been commented upon by a number of historians in recent years,[1] and we will engage with that debate later. Here we are specifically concerned with a particular reform effort which affected the conditions of widows, whose pitiful conditions, whose celibate and austere lives, whose exclusion from the privileges and protection of the Hindu extended family remained unchanged, despite the reform endeavours of men like Rammohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and others. As the realities stand, while the

[1] See for example, Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: 1993); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (London: 2001).

former had succeeded in achieving his goal, the latter's mission ended in what has been described as an 'unavoidable defeat'.[2] Regulation XVII of 1829 abolished sati, the eradication of which was on Rammohun's reform agenda. Widow burning was made a penal offence, any violation of which would immediately invite the regulating hand of the state. Rammohun could thus save widows from being immolated, as the constant presence of state power and the law enforcing apparatus ensured it. But Vidyasagar failed to see many widows being remarried, as in this case the Act of 1856 had only legalised their marriage, in the sense that children born of such marriages would inherit ancestral property. But the legislation could not make widow remarriage socially acceptable; nor was it possible to enforce it with the help of a police force. So Vidyasagar had to depend ultimately on social consent, not on the power of the state, and it was here that his 'defeat' was quite manifest. But we might ask whether this was in fact avoidable or not.

It may also be argued that in retrospect the movement does not appear to have totally failed after all. That widow remarriage has gained in social legitimacy today is partly due to this nineteenth century reform endeavour. But it may be pointed out also that this legitimation has taken place only among the educated sections of the community and even within that limited social space it is not as yet a widespread practice. 'Everyone feels the evil and wishes that it could be removed', wrote *Hindu Patriot* in 1855, 'but the difficulty is how to meet the lion in his den'.[3] Widow remarriage remains exceptional among the educated even today, as it was in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. And contrary to the existing stereotypes, the uneducated and the lower orders are as ardent defenders of this taboo as are their social superiors. This compels us to think once again about the practical 'defeat' of this reform movement, despite its greater acceptance as an ideal among the educated and the enlightened.

The existing literature[4] seeks to explain this 'defeat' by focusing mainly on the weaknesses of the reformist effort and on the limitations of a colonial modernity—but does not adequately emphasise the power of a tradition that could withstand such reformist endeavours.

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[2] Asok Sen, *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagra and His Elusive Milestones* (Calcutta: 1977), p. 6.

[3] Benoy Ghosh (ed.), *Selections From English Periodicals of 19th Century Bengal*, Vol. III (Calcutta: 1979), p. 116.

[4] A. Sen, *Elusive Milestones*; Amales Tripathi, *Vidyasagar, The Traditional Moderniser* (Calcutta: 1976).

The explanation offered in this chapter is concerned mainly with the sustaining power of the traditional culture of the Bengali Hindus, as it was to this realm of culture that the issue of widow remarriage ultimately belonged. Culture, as Peter Burke has defined it, is 'a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms… in which they are expressed and embodied'.[5] Forms of marriage or the social organisation of human sexuality and relationship are to be understood in terms of their cultural connotations and imputed social meanings. But culture is also multi-layered, as there are different cultures for different social groups. Usually we assume a simple dichotomy between the two broad cultural traditions, the 'elite culture' and the 'popular culture', or to use E. P. Thompson's phraseology, between 'patrician' and 'plebeian' cultures.[6] But, as we have argued already, we need not assume a clinical disjunction between the two traditions, as there is constant interaction and overlaps, though of an unequal nature, between the two. As a result of this process, popular culture often accepts and internalises the ideologies of the elite and assumes in some respects a common interface with the elite culture. This process of the 'reform of popular culture', which we also mentioned in the first chapter, can be further elaborated here to understand this particular phenomenon. This process, which Peter Burke first talked about in relation to early modern Europe,[7] implies an imposition of certain elite cultural forms on the masses from above, rather than voluntary emulative behaviour of the socially mobile groups from below, as suggested in our familiar 'Sanskritisation' discourse.[8] Martin Ingram has more cogently defined the process in the following words:

> …the world of popular culture came under attack from elite groups (clergy, nobility and some middle class groups in town and country) who gradually attenuated and transformed many aspects of social life among the mass of the people. This 'reform of popular culture' combined attempts to suppress many popular activities and to modify the behaviour of the common people,… and the sponsoring of a new 'popular' or 'mass' culture, which embodied the ideologies of the ruling elites.[9]

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[5] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: 1978), p. 11.
[6] E. P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 7, 1974, p. 395.
[7] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture,* pp. 207–43.
[8] See, M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Bombay: 1977), pp. 1–45.
[9] Martin Ingram, 'The Reform of Popular Culture: Sex and Marriage in Early Modern England', in Barry Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth Century England* (London: 1988), pp. 129–30.

This concept[10] can be a useful tool for understanding and explaining the success or failure of the reforms proposed by men like Vidyasagar. In this chapter we will try to show that the taboo on widow remarriage, which was adhered to by more people than is usually believed, was in itself the result of a reform of popular culture. This first process of reform was so effective and of such antiquity that the subsequent attempt at counter-reform was bound to fail, given the weakness of the reform ideology and the vulnerability of the strategy to promote it. And caste played a significant role in this predicament of reformist modernity.

II

One of the major contentions of the feminist critique of the nineteenth century reform movements is that the issues, undertaken by them, concerned mainly a small section of women. The reform endeavours therefore reflected only the paternalism of the elitist male reformers, concerned exclusively with their own class and their eagerness to retain their patriarchal control over the private spheres of life.[11] The first premise of this feminist discourse, however, needs to be re-examined, for compulsory widow celibacy, like many other similar customs, was more widely practiced than indicated by the available cultural stereotypes, both old and recent.

In Bengal widow remarriage was strictly forbidden among the upper castes and most of the middle ranking castes in the nineteenth century. The 1891 census list of castes that forbade widow remarriage included, apart from the Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas of the upper stratum, the various trading castes, as well as the Sadgops, Sundis, Mahishyas, Telis, Mayras and Napits.[12] It was allowed among the lower castes, but they too appear to have shared the values of their social superiors. Widow remarriage even when permitted was looked down upon and was disparagingly referred to as *sanga* marriage, a practice prevalent in many other parts of India as well. Among

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[10] For more details see, Reay (ed.), *Seventeenth Century England*, Introduction, pp. 17–22; also David Hall, 'Introduction', in S. L. Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to Nineteenth Century* (Berlin: 1984).

[11] For a discussion of this critique, see Barbara N. Ramusack, 'From Symbol to Diversity: The Historical Literature on Women in India', *South Asia Research*, vol. 10, no. 2, November 1990, pp. 154ff.

[12] *Census of India*, 1891, Vol. III, The Report, p. 267.

the Namasudras of Bengal, for example, the couples in cases of widow remarriage occupied a lower place in the estimation of their caste fellows and were referred to as *Krishna-paksha* (dark fortnight after full moon), while those married in the regular way were described as *Sukla-paksha* (bright fortnight after new moon).[13] The very use of the terms 'dark' or 'bright' indicates the respective values attached by the community to the two forms of marriage. And by the beginning of the twentieth century, they too like many other *antyaja jatis* (low-born castes) around them had almost completely discontinued the practice and begun to conform to the traditional upper caste behavioural norms of widowhood.[14] At the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, it was perhaps only the lowest menial groups like the 'Doms, Boonas, Bagdis and "low people" of various kinds' and the so-called 'aborigines' who practiced widow remarriage without any stigma attached to it, while the rest of the Bengali Hindu society strictly forbade this custom.[15] Nothing can be a better indicator of the failure or 'defeat' of the reform movement to introduce widow remarriage.

But side-by-side we also come across another social phenomenon the importance of which need not be underestimated. And that was the increasing social legitimacy of widow remarriage among the educated *bhadralok* who had been constructing in the nineteenth century new 'models of womanhood' to suit the socio-psychological as well as political needs of the time.[16] During Vidyasagar's lifetime, important groups in Calcutta, in addition to Young Bengal, and a significant section of the native press, like *Hindu Patriot, Tattwabodhini Patrika, Sambad Purnachandroday* or *Bamabodhini Patrika* had lent full support to his reform movement.[17] And as the *bhadralok* category kept expanding across caste and local boundaries and a burgeoning print culture extended the public space where social issues were being

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[13] Risley Collection, Eur. Mss. E. 295, Vol. 3, pp. 258–59, Vol. 4, p. 95, India Office Library, London.

[14] Shyamlal Sen, *Jatitattva-Vivek* (Barisal: 1797 Saka), p. 111.

[15] H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891, reprint, Calcutta: 1981), vol. I, p. lxxxiv.

[16] For details on the construction of these models, see Uma Chakraborty, 'Whatever Happened to The Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: 1990), pp. 27–87.

[17] B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 116; Benoy Ghosh (ed.), *Samayikpatre Banglar Samajchitra*, Vol. III (Calcutta: 1980) (hereafter *Samajchitra*), pp. 70–71, 166–67; B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. IV, pp. 157–66.

debated and public opinion formed, this legitimacy became more and more broad-based. The Bengali *bhadralok* was never a closed status group incorporating only the members of the three traditional upper castes. In reality, as John McGuire's quantitative study has shown, in the latter half of the nineteenth century the Calcutta *bhadralok* community included individuals belonging to as many as eighteen different castes.[18] In the early twentieth century, as the reach of education and literacy stretched further down the caste hierarchy,[19] there were fresh entrants into this category. And as the newcomers gained access to the new literate culture of the educated urban *bhadralok*, they also began to accept and imbibe the reform ideology of the latter. To them widow remarriage now appeared to be good conduct or '*sadachar*', while its prohibition became '*kadachar*' or bad conduct.[20] A symbolic acceptance of this innovation was taken as a signifier of their entrance into the new status group and its modernist culture.

Thus as a direct legacy of the reform movement started by Vidyasagar to introduce widow remarriage we find during the decades immediately following his death two parallel situations developing in tandem. On the one hand, prohibition of widow remarriage became a far more widely practiced popular custom, while on the other, the innovation of widow remarriage gained wider social legitimacy among the educated sections of society. But even those who had accepted the modernist innovation in principle refrained from practicing it in real life. This paradoxical situation constitutes a problematic that can be explained only with reference to the dynamics of popular culture in Bengal in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

III

Public control over private life has been a dominant feature of Bengali Hindu society. In this cultural milieu, marriage was not just a consensual union between two individuals, as we understand it today in a modern sense. It was, indeed, the concern of the whole community, as endogamy was one of the fundamental aspects of the caste system

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[18] John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadralok in Calcutta, 1857–1885* (Canberra: 1983), p. 22.

[19] *Census of India,* 1911, Vol. V, Part I, Subsidiary Table VI, p. 373.

[20] Madhusudan Sarkar, *'Abar Bidhaba Bibaha Keno?'*, *Navyabharat*, vol. 25, no. 12, Chaitra 1314 B.S.

with a bearing on social rank. Transactional modalities, rituals and rites in a marriage were therefore parts of a public spectacle, supervised and monitored by the community. The slightest deviation from the established norms would lead to public censor, while major violations invited more severe punishments, usually the social boycott of the erring families. Popular Hinduism in other words inculcated an ideology of discipline, which was enforced or maintained through the hierarchical structure of social authority as expressed through the idiom of caste. As we have already noted, caste represented a normative system, which defined, determined and also legitimised the social structure.[21] And it is here that we can find the major key to understanding the problematic that we have before us.

The *Hindu Patriot* in 1855 recognised without any reservation the rationale of the proposed reform of widow remarriage. But for it the major problem was how 'to bring about so desirable an end as the removal of miseries of our helpless females without incurring the *risk of losing caste* with all its concomitant disadvantages'.[22] The widow involved in the first proposed case of widow remarriage, who was subsequently let down by the prospective bridegroom, also complained that 'she had by such refusal lost her position in society and is now an *outcaste*'.[23] Even the observers who had participated in the first widow remarriage ceremony organised by Vidyasagar, were 'completely *outcasted*' by the large majority of *bhadralok* in Calcutta.[24] Social rebels like Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay, who had committed a double sin by marrying outside his caste and by marrying a widow, had to ultimately acquiesce to this social tyranny and had to migrate and seek refuge in a completely different and distant social environment of Awadh.[25] What appears to be crucial in all these stories is the fear of 'losing caste', of being excommunicated by the society, which intimidated people into surrendering to dominant social norms. The question therefore is, what were the social implications of this phenomenon of 'losing caste' and how was the terror that it generated organised.

We have already noted in our first chapter that caste as a normative system prescribed for each group in society, according to its rank,

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[21] For a more detailed discussion on this aspect see, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872–1937* (Calcutta: 1990), pp. 1–51.
[22] B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 116; emphasis added.
[23] Quoted in A. Sen, *Elusive Milestones*, p. 58; emphasis added.
[24] McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind*, p. 37; emphasis added.
[25] McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind*, p. 40.

certain codes of conduct or *jatidharma*,[26] which every individual had to perform in real life. This performance was believed to be the chief determinant of the quality of the body spiritual, which determined a person's ritual as well as social rank and therefore took precedence over his/her body individual. Any deviation from such codes would lead to the fall from the ascribed rank, or loss of caste, which implied the denial of all sorts of interaction with the local community and sometimes even the denial of essential social services. The codes varied from group to group, but always there was a tendency of the lower groups changing and remoulding their behavioural patterns with reference to the elite model. The process which Alfred Lyall had once described as 'the gradual Brahmanisation of the aboriginal non-Aryan or casteless tribes' had reached such a point in Bengal by the mid-1880's that Herbert Risley could not detect any variance in customs and ceremonies of the different castes, high and low. He had to adopt, therefore, the method of anthropometric measurement in order to determine the origins of the intermediary and lower castes, which could thus be separated, somewhat arbitrarily, from the upper castes, to fit into his racial model of Aryan-non-Aryan dichotomy in Hindu society.[27] The phenomenon, which Lyall and Risley had observed in the nineteenth century, was no doubt a reflection of the process of reform of popular culture, which had taken place apparently through volition, or not certainly through any visible application of power.

But this acculturation was not entirely voluntary; there was, as it appears, an element of compulsion in it. In order to gain access to Hindu society and to move up in its status ranking scale, acceptance of its behavioural norms was mandatory. These norms were essentially based on an ideology of hierarchy that legitimised the prime position of the Brahmans who, because of their monopoly over knowledge, both defined such normative standards of social behaviour as also arbitrated in cases of their violation. But the maintenance of social discipline, or the actual execution of the Brahman's mandate, depended on an elaborate power structure within which every single individual had his or her own location. The primary unit within this

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[26] Ronald B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture* (New Delhi: 1976), pp. 14–21.

[27] H. H. Risley, 'On the Application of Dr Toppinard's Anthropometric System to the Castes and Tribes of Bengal', 8 March 1886, Govt. of Bengal, Financial (Miscellaneous) Proceedings, March 1887, pp. 83–85, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

structure was the extended family, which was always patriarchal, as patriarchy alone corresponded to the hierarchical ethos of Hindu society. The family household, as it appears from the late nineteenth century evidence, was organised in a hierarchical structure of obedience, in which every member was situated according to age, generation and gender, the supreme position of authority being held by the eldest member, the patriarch or the *Karta*.[28]

Women, who were expected to obey their husbands, held the lowest position, in terms of entitlement to the rights and resources of the family. An anonymous author wrote in a popular treatise entitled *Hindu Dharmaniti* (Principles of The Hindu Religion) in the late nineteenth century:

> The wife should follow her husband like his shadow; she should be like his friend in performing all religious duties; and like his maid she should carry out all his orders.... The wife who retains her smile in spite of the harsh words and angry looks of her husband, is considered to have properly performed her sacred duties.[29]

What was thus defined as the *dharma* or the duties of an ideal wife virtually implied her unconditional surrender to the dictates of the husband, and this subjection would continue even beyond the death of the husband, as marriage was conceived to be a relationship of eternal bondage. As another pamphlet called *Hindu Narir Kartabya* (Duties of Hindu Women) noted in 1916: 'The duties of a widow are included among the duties of a wife. For marital relations among Hindus continue even beyond death.'[30] It was this eternalist concept of marriage that rationalised prohibition on widow remarriage. But such restrictions were not applicable to the widowers, as in Bengali Hindu society of the nineteenth century though polyandry was unthinkable, polygamy was an acceptable and in certain cases a legitimate social practice. A widower was thus often encouraged to remarry, particularly for procreating progeny for the patriliny. The early twentieth century Bengali literature bears ample testimony to the existence of this social mentality.[31]

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[28] Shib Chandra Bose, *The Hindoos As They Are*, second edn (Calcutta: 1883), pp. 2–3.
[29] Author unknown, *Hindu Dharmaniti* (Calcutta: 1794 Saka), p. 8.
[30] Jatindramohan Gupta, *Hindu Narir Kartabya* (Calcutta: 1323 B.S.), p. 108.
[31] Cited in Bharati Ray, 'Do We Have A Choice? Widows of India with Special Reference to Bengal, 1900–1956', paper presented at the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, June 1990 and at the Seventeenth International Conference of the Historical Sciences, August–September 1990.

In the traditional social hierarchy of the Hindus, the women and the Sudras were the two lowest categories, as both were denied access to Vedic religious rites. Later on as sections of the Sudra *jatis* became socially mobile, gained access to elite culture, much of it being available in print, and became claimants to higher ritual status, they too began to conform to the patriarchal norms of upper caste elite families. Even women of these castes were so deeply socialised into this essentially elite (or upper caste) and male worldview that they too accepted without any question this patriarchal standard of morality. 'Devoted wives must always follow their husbands dead or alive', wrote *Mahishya Mahila*, the journal of the Mahishya women, in 1911. 'Because, it is only by serving the husband that a woman can reach the heaven.'[32] The prohibition on widow remarriage, which thus virtually implied a total control over the minds and bodies of women by their husbands dead or alive, had become, as we have noted already, an almost universal practice in Bengal by the beginning of the twentieth century. But this near total acceptance of the moral code of widow celibacy was not just due to voluntary imitative urge from below. It resulted from a long drawn out and often imperceptible process of the reform of popular culture imposed from above.

At an ideological level, such codes of moral behaviour derived their legitimacy from the injunctions of the *shastra* or scriptures as interpreted by the Brahmans, who enjoyed, till the advent of print culture, a near total monopoly over Sanskrit textual knowledge. Even when the printing press allowed a broader section of the people access to the scriptures, it was not the texts as such which were taken to the people,[33] but the commentaries written by these pundits, which became more popular and widely read. Thus, paradoxically, the spread of education or literacy in Bengal led to further dissemination of traditional cultural ideas in society. The modernising impact of education depends on its content, or as Bernard Cohn remarked, on 'what people read after they have become literate'.[34] Even a cursory glance at the list of vernacular publications in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries,[35] would at once reveal that the

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[32] *Mahishya Mahila*, Agrahayan–Paush 1318 B.S.

[33] Basumati Sahitya Mandir was one of the pioneering organisations responsible for the publication of such *Smriti*, *Nyaya* and *Darshana* texts published since the time of Rammohun Roy.

[34] Bernard S. Cohn, *India*: *The Social Anthropology of a Civilization* (New Jersey: 1971), p. 100.

[35] See for example, National Library, India, *Author Catalogue of Printed Books*

average reading public in Bengal was more interested in the traditional lore or the knowledge of the *shastras*, than in the new secular humanistic knowledge brought in by a colonial modernity.

The educated Bengalees' continuing allegiance to *shastra* was reinforced by the Orientalist tradition, which attached supreme importance to the scriptures for understanding Indian society. During the debate over *sati* the competing discourses established the 'centrality' of the Brahmanic scriptures in determining the legitimacy of social customs.[36] Vidyasagar too acted within this tradition. Himself a Sanskrit scholar by training, he recognised the power of the *shastra*, from which he believed all social behavioural codes derived their legitimacy. His innovation of widow remarriage would acquire social acceptance, as his expectation was, only if it could be supported by some scriptural maxims; because, as he noted, 'in this country people behaved according to the dicta of the shastra and only the shastra'.[37] In his first treatise on widow remarriage we find a massive effort to hunt for a supportive text from the available corpus of scriptural knowledge. But Vidyasagar, it seems, misunderstood his own society.

The *shastra* constituted only one element among many on the basis of which the moral—behavioural codes were constructed. The other elements were oral traditions and longstanding customary usages that gave Hinduism the character of a folklorised religion. Thus when Vidyasagar discovered in *Parasara Samhita* a maxim in support of his reform, the *Hindu Intelligencer* immediately pointed out that

> …the views of Parasara, if they were such as have been interpreted to us by the author of the brochure under notice [that is, Vidyasagar's first treatise on widow remarriage], have never been adopted by the Hindus, and will continue to be discarded by the people of this country for a long time to come.[38]

Samachar Sudhabarshan also proffered the same argument, 'Since the beginning of the Kali Yuga till date, the remarriage of Hindu

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in Bengali Language, vols I–IV, (Calcutta: 1959–63); also J. F. Blumhardt (ed.), *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office*, Vol. II, Part IV (London: 1905).

[36] For an excellent discussion on this aspect, see Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India', in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women*, pp. 88–126.

[37] Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, *'Bidhaba-Bibaha Prachalito Haoya Uchit Kina Etadbishayak Prastab'* (Should Widow-Remarriage be Introduced?), in Gopal Haldar (ed.), *Vidyasagar Rachana Sangraha*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: 1972), pp. 21–22.

[38] *Hindu Intelligencer*, 12 February 1855, B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 112.

widows has never been *heard of, nor seen*. And it is for this reason that people believe that widow-remarriage is against the shastras and the codes of good conduct.'[39] This statement needs to be emphasised as it implied that the popular perception that widow remarriage did not conform to the accepted standards of moral conduct, was not derived from any written tradition. It was based on hearsay or a long-standing social tradition, which a citation from an obsolete text could not invalidate. To the Hindus 'established custom is law' and in this case, the age-old, often believed to be 'eternal', custom was to debar the widows from re-entering connubial relations.[40] No textual evidence or rationalist discourse could displace this autonomy of tradition. An editorial in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, while discussing the futility of Vidyasagar's reform endeavour, very aptly summarised this situation: 'The common people neither follow reason, nor understand shastra; local customs also follow more or less the established tradition. These people hate widow remarriage as a great sin, as they find it to be alien to their tradition.'[41]

Vidyasagar had also realised, though much later, the power of oral tradition and customs and admitted it in his second treatise on widow-remarriage, 'Most of the people in this country are ignorant of the shastra. Therefore when there is a debate on any issue concerning the shastra, they cannot evaluate the arguments of both sides to get at the actual truth.'As they remained 'slaves of local customs' or '*desachar*', they continued to prohibit widow remarriage and thus 'ignored the injunctions of the shastra'. But local customs in this country changed from time to time and therefore, as a rationalist, Vidyasagar hoped that this inhuman custom could be changed provided there was the right type of social consciousness.[42] But he himself could not promote this consciousness, as neither he nor his associates were able to offer a radically new ideology—and they did not sufficiently challenge the power structure that sustained the old custom.

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[39] *Samachar Sudhabarshan*, 29 December 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, p. 140, emphasis added.

[40] *Hindu Patriot*, 15 February 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 115; *Samachar Sudhabarshan*, 6 November 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, p. 137.

[41] *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Sraban 1277 B.S., in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, pp. 166–67.

[42] Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, '*Bidhaba Bibaha Pracholito Hoya Uchit Kina Etadbishayak Prastab: Dwitiya Pustak*', in G. Haldar (ed.), *Vidyasagar Rachana Sangraha*, Vol. 2, pp. 36, 160–61.

Before we go into the limitations of the reform movement, it is essential to discuss the power structure that maintained social discipline and punished the errant in Bengali society. At the primary or family level, it was the *Karta* who enforced the prescribed codes of behaviour on the individual members of his family. If he failed to do so, the family as a collective was held responsible for the violation or deviation and was liable to be excommunicated or ostracised. It could also be absolved, if the violation was involuntary, through the performance of *prayaschitta* or ritual atonement.[43] Such matters affecting families were the concerns of their immediate larger body, the clan or *goshthi* headed by the *goshthipati* who often adjudicated, with the advice of the clan elders, in such social disputes.[44] But the more serious matters, particularly those involving the possibility of excommunication were referred to the higher authority, the caste council or the *jati panchayat*. Each caste had its own council, which settled disputes relating to caste and family affairs and acted as the custodian of public morality. All these councils were however subservient to the larger *samaja*, which actually meant the hierarchy of castes living within a particular territory. In medieval Bengal, as we have already noted, with minimum interference from the central state authority, the territorial chiefs or the Rajas, and below them the zamindars, controlled the *samajas*. In a medieval Bengali Hindu chiefdom there existed different levels of leadership for social control. But all these levels were tied to each other in fixed vertical relationships and at the apex stood the Raja, the most powerful patron in the whole chiefdom.[45] This medieval system of control, as we have seen, continued into the early British period, as the Raja—pundit nexus, with one group enjoying monopoly over political power and the other a monopoly over scriptural knowledge, controlled popular culture in the early colonial period as well. These power elites retained their control at the local level even in the nineteenth century, by adjusting themselves to the changes in the political structure of the colonial state. Through a new institution called *dal*, they carved out an autonomous space for themselves within the power structure of the modernising colonial

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[43] Bani Chakraborti, *Samaj-Sanskarak Raghunandan* (Calcutta: 1970), pp. 246–48, 255, 259.

[44] Umeschandra Gupta, *Jatitattva-baridhi-dwitiya bhag ba Ballal-mohamudgar* (Calcutta: 1905), p. 441.

[45] Ronald Inden, 'Hindu Chiefdom in Middle Bengali Literature', in Edward C. Dimock, Jr. (ed.), *Bengal: Literature and History* (East Lansing, Michigan: 1967), pp. 25ff.

state. The *dals* and their powerful *dalapatis* (leaders), with their influence and clientele stretching from the colonial metropolis of Calcutta into the interior villages, remained the arbiters of caste norms and social discipline, despite the overarching presence of the colonial courts and their jurisdiction over all civil and personal matters.[46]

By the early twentieth century, the *dal* was gradually replaced by the various exclusive caste associations that began to emerge in Bengal in great numbers since 1905. These organisations, as discussed earlier,[47] were responsible for the process that we have described as the 'reform of popular culture'. Through them more and more upper caste behavioural norms and notions of morality found acceptance and wider currency among the people of the lower orders. The hegemonic culture set the limits to the imagination of the upwardly mobile lower caste groups, who could not think of subverting the ritual order or repudiating its moral–behavioural codes. Any deviation from such prescribed norms led to a fall from the ascribed rank and this was monitored, we have seen, through an efficient and ubiquitous control mechanism. As *Hindu Patriot* noted in 1855: 'Conservatism forms a principal feature in the character of the Hindu.... The slightest breach of the established rules and practices is attended with serious consequences—the rash innovator is branded with infamy and discarded from all social intercourse.'[48] It was for this innate 'conservatism' of popular culture that even those who recognised the rationality of widow remarriage could not actually practice it.

The power structure within Hindu society, together with its normative system, both based on the concept of hierarchy and expressed through the cultural idiom of caste, operated as a 'massive chain'[49] that kept the entire society bound together. Important changes in the socio-economic structure were accommodated, but this was a gradual and long drawn process; the Sudra *jatis*, for example, were given more and more rights towards the turn of the century. Deviations from moral behavioural codes, on the other hand, were usually dealt with individually and were often pardoned after the performance of penance. The system in other words, made piecemeal adjustments,

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[46] S. N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Myth and History* (Calcutta: 1971), see chapter 1 for more details.

[47] See chapter 1 of this book.

[48] *Hindu Patriot*, 15 February 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 116.

[49] *Friend of India*, 5 June 1851, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, pp. 44–45.

but lacked the capacity to cushion or absorb the shock of any sudden or radical organisational reform. Like a 'massive chain', as a correspondent of the *Friend of India* observed in 1851, 'Caste must exist in its entirety, or gradually cease altogether'.[50] The texture and colour of this chain would of course depend on what end of the social scale one was looking at it from. So far as the 'lower classes' were concerned, as Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya conceded in his book *Hindu Castes and Sects* (1896), it would look like 'an iron chain', but for the 'higher classes… caste is a golden chain which they have willingly placed around their neck, and which has fixed them to only that which is noble and praiseworthy.'[51]

But it was one continuous chain nonetheless, no matter how its colour diverged in the eyes of different groups of people. Destruction of any particular component of that chain would mean its losing the capacity to bind and that would imply the loss of power and privilege for a traditionalist elite who had so long ruled society and controlled popular culture. This meant that what was 'noble and praiseworthy' for the higher castes also became the mandatory behavioural pattern for those who were lower down the ritual order. Any deviation was feared to invoke the apparition of social anarchy and invited firm resistance. When, for example, the prohibition of *kulin polygamy* was proposed, a panicky 'defender' of the system wrote a letter to the editor of the *Reformer* stating that if it was stopped by authority, it would lead to 'nothing short of great confusion and breach of peace'.[52] Vidyasagar himself had to call in the police a number of times so that the widow remarriage ceremonies which he organised could pass off smoothly.[53] The conservative press at the same time continued to threaten the widows willing to remarry with the consequences of ostracisation.[54] Another story of social coercion is that of Girischandra Vidyaratna, a Sanskrit pundit and a colleague of Vidyasagar at Sanskrit College, who had joined his friend in his social crusade for widow remarriage. To his bewilderment he found the marriage engagement

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[50] *Friend of India*, 5 June 1851, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, pp. 44–45.
[51] Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects* (1896, reprint, Calcutta: 1967), p. 7.
[52] *Reformer*, 7 April 1833, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. I, p. 170.
[53] Subal Chandra Mitra, *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar* (Calcutta: 1902), p. 319.
[54] *Samachar Sudhabarshan*, 29 December 1855 in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, p. 140.

of his eldest daughter broken up by the local Brahmans, because he refused to apologise and dissociate himself from the reform movement. On Vidyasagar's advice, he married her to a *maulik* Brahman, inferior in status to a *kulin* one. Then he found his family priest refusing services to him. If he somehow solved this problem, his resolve broke down when it came to the marriage negotiations for his second daughter. Now, supposedly with the approval of his friend Vidyasagar, he surrendered to the Brahmans, severed all connections with the reform movement, performed ritual atonement, and only then could he find an appropriate groom for his daughter.[55] The battle over widow remarriage had thus become for the traditionalist elite a fight for a symbol of authority and domination against an encroaching rationalist modernity. To lose the battle would mean the destruction of that 'massive chain' which had ensured their hegemony.

To fortify their position further, the traditionalist elite argued that the caste system, both its structural and normative aspects taken together, was the essence of Hinduism, and so the destruction of the one would mean the annihilation of the other.[56] To lose caste would therefore mean losing religion, that is to say, a forced uprooting from the familiar social and cultural environment—a terrifying prospect for any individual or family. Some people braved the consequences, as there are instances of widows being converted to Islam or Christianity before actually getting remarried.[57] This meant that they had to get out of the control mechanism of Hindu society before defying its cultural norms. But most people did not dare to do so because of the dreadful implications. *Samachar Sudhabarshan* could therefore boast, 'Widow-remarriage would mean violation of a part of the Hindu shastras, which we do not think most of the religious minded people would be courageous enough to risk.'[58]

IV

Vidyasagar was aware of and functioned within this established power structure of Hindu society and its teleological boundaries. In other

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[55] For this information I am thankful to Brian Hatcher, who is currently writing on Vidyaratna.

[56] See chapter 1 for discussion on this.

[57] *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Jaishtha 1277 B.S., in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, p. 165; *Census of India*, 1901, Vol. VI, Part I, Appendix II.

[58] *Samachar Sudhabarshan,* 6 November 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, p. 137.

words, neither did he think of confronting the power structure, nor did he offer any fundamentally different ideological alternative. This ambivalence becomes apparent when we look closely at his two treatises on widow remarriage.

To some of his traditionalist contemporaries Vidyasagar was a representative of the western educated intelligentsia. For the *Hindu Intelligencer*, he was 'the learned Principal of the Sanscrit [sic] College, who is regarded by foreigners as a man of enlarged views and deep research'.[59] And to the *Sambad Prabhakar*, his only achievement was the Anglicisation of the Sanskrit College, which was not allowed to develop in the way it should have![60] But whatever his popular image might have been, in Vidyasagar's reformist ideology we can detect the complex co-existence of both tradition and modernity, or as Brian Hatcher has described it, 'an unresolved tension' between 'sastric and modern idioms'.[61] Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently discussed this 'duality of attitudes' in Vidyasagar. His sympathy for widows, which was partly the result of his individual experience, emanated from his 'inborn trait' of being soft hearted, (being described as *karunasagar* or ocean of compassion) and here his attitude is non-rational or non-modern. Chakrabarty, however, finds a trace of his modernity when this same compassion is generalised and leads to a rationalist urge for social action to ameliorate the conditions of all widows through legislation, thus invoking the power of the colonial state.[62] However, despite Vidyasagar's rationalist attitude to reform his dualism was also quite self-evident in the very strategies he adopted to promote his reformist agenda. His upbringing in Calcutta—being educated at Sanskrit College, where he studied both the traditional Sanskrit texts as well as English language and then being associated with the colonial state holding an important position within its Education department—would hardly allow him to avoid this ideological ambivalence of the mid-nineteenth century Bengali modernity.

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[59] *Hindu Intelligencer*, 12 February 1855 in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 112.

[60] *Sambad Prabhakar,* 21 April 1265 B.S. in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. II, p. 177.

[61] Brian A. Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement: Vidyasagar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1996), p. 259 and passim.

[62] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, Oxford: 2000), pp. 119–29; also his, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago, London: 2002), pp. 101–05.

At the very outset, in his first treatise on widow remarriage, Vidyasagar did not overtly privilege reason as a strategy of presenting his reform agenda, for he believed that people were not amenable to reason and were only governed by *shastra*. So he went on interpreting and reinterpreting the *shastra*, trying to prove that his reform had sanctions within the corpus of traditional religious texts. However, this approach stood at an interesting epistemological intersection between modernity and tradition. On the one hand, he seems to have accepted the colonial stereotype of a rationalist divide in Indian society, with a small rational elite and the masses of unreasonable people governed by the scriptures. But at the back of his mind, there was also a rationalist hope that if he could argue his case with textual evidence from the *shastra,* he would be able to convince his people about the legitimacy of his reform agenda. On the other hand, what he was doing was qualitatively perhaps not very different from what the Nabadwip and Bhatpara pundits did when they issued *vyavastha* on various social issues. Indeed, some time before Vidyasagar wrote his first treatise, some of the pundits had issued a *vyavastha* sanctioning the marriage of the widowed daughter of one Shyamacharan Das of Calcutta.[63] So the difference here was one of degree only: the *vyavastha* was applicable to individual cases, while Vidyasagar's reform had implications for the entire society. But then, *vyavasthas* with wider social application were by no means rare in pre-colonial history. So Vidyasagar had reason to believe that he could present an apparently modernist reform by invoking the pre-existing moral authority of the *shastra.*

But this method of referring to the *shastra* failed and Vidyasagar in his second treatise appealed for a change of the local custom or *desachar*. While doing this, he argued:

> No one can prove that there has been no change in our customs since the first day of creation.... If an example is cited, you will be able to realise more easily to what extent the customs have changed in our country. In olden times, if a Sudra sat with a Brahman, there would have been no end to his crime. Now those very Sudras take the higher seats, and the Brahmans like obliging servants sit below.

This was, as Vidyasagar's footnote goes, 'against the shastra'. So at the end of his treatise he laments:

> Oh shastra! What a misfortune has befallen you! People who live their lives by indulging in activities which you have repeatedly identified as

[63] Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, *'Bidhaba Bibaha… Etadbishayak Prastab'*, pp. 14–17.

> destructive of religion and caste are hailed as wise and pious, while those who even mention, not to speak of performance, the duty which you prescribe as an appropriate dharma [referring to widow remarriage] are endlessly rebuked as atheist, irreligious and unwise.[64]

While critiquing the unreasonableness of his people, he is also making here a clear statement vindicating the hierarchical ethos of traditional Hindu society. Thus, despite occasional references to equal rights for women,[65] Vidyasagar also remained embedded in the discourse of hierarchy throughout the reform movement.

The notion of patriarchic control over women in Hindu society, as we have discussed earlier, emanated from this concept of an all-encompassing hierarchy. Vidyasagar had also accepted and internalised this notion. The language in which he phrased his reform proposal clearly revealed his concern for maintaining patriarchic control over female sexuality and family discipline. What we find in his two treatises is first of all a definite and honest statement of paternalistic sympathy for the miserable plight of the widows. Alongside, what is also writ large is a concern for the falling standards of public morality, a sense of unease emanating from his understanding of *dharma* as a virtue of self-restraint. He condemns men for their unbridled passion; but his disdain for *jathechchhachar* or action devoid of morality,[66] as reflected in this reformist discourse, also reveals an anxiety about innately uncontrollable female sexuality. The increasing social tendency towards adultery and foeticide is attributed to the insatiable sexual appetite of widowed women. Unable to lead a life of self-denial, they indulged in illicit sex and thus put to shame all the three lineages of their husband, father and mother. So it was necessary to regulate and direct this unrestrained and wayward female sexuality into a socially legitimate channel, that of marriage and for this it was essential to remove the prohibition on widow remarriage.[67] The reform, in other words, was meant to ensure social discipline and patriarchic control over women's bodies and desires.

Most of the educated contemporaries of Vidyasagar who supported his cause shared this basic hierarchic assumption of gender inequality

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[64] Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, *'Bidhaba Bibaha… Dwitiya Pustak'*, pp. 161, 164.
[65] Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, '*Ratnapariksha*', in *Vidyasagar Rachana Sangraha*, Vol. 2, p. 538.
[66] For more on Vidyasagar's conception of dharma, see Brian A. Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement*, chapter 10.
[67] Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, *'Bidhaba Bibaha… Etadbishayak Prastab'*, p. 32 and *passim*; *'Bidhaba Bibaha… Dwitiya Pustak'*, pp. 164–65 and *passim*.

and expressed the same concern for public morality. The growing sexual anarchy in society was exclusively attributed to the inability of the widows to restrain their libido, which, as the more progressive *Tattvabodhini Patrika* apprehended, would affect other women in society and would thus completely destroy the family structure. Of course, for the consumption of the educated middle class, the pleas for widow remarriage were also coated from time to time in a language of equality and reason. If men could remarry after the death of their wives, the *Patrika* asked, why could the widows not do the same? But in same breath it also argued in a sexist language that widow remarriage was all the more necessary as the libidinal urge of women was eight times greater than that of men! It was for this reason that all of them could not restrain their desires and brought infamy to Bengal.[68] A biological dimension was thus added to the concept of innate gender inequality. Other proponents of the reform also shared the same concern for the falling standards of public morality and believed that what had further contributed to this social disorder were the other two evil institutions of child marriage and *kulin* polygamy,[69] which were also on the nineteenth century reform agenda.

This masculinist anxiety about innate and uncontrollable feminine sexuality was embedded in the Hindu cultural tradition.[70] We should remember here that Vidyasagar's moralist argument was not merely to kindle the *bhadralok* fear of individual scandals threatening their new sense of domestic respectability, as supposed by Dipesh Chakrabarty.[71] It sounded more like a widely shared traditional fear of a sexual dystopia arising from uncontrolled female sexuality, which appears in the writings of the medieval *smritikaras* from Raghunandan onwards. As the purity of the *jati* could only be transmitted to the progeny through the reproductive power of women, Hindu society has always felt the need to control female sexuality through the institution of endogamy.[72] And therefore, the ideology of reform as Vidyasagar and his supporters presented it, appeared as not so much an alternative to but as a derivative of the ideology of hierarchy, which

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[68] *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, no. 140, Chaitra 1776 Saka, in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra,* Vol. IV, pp. 158–62.

[69] *Sangbad Purnachandrodaya*, 17 June 1851; *Sarbasubhakari Patrika*, no. 1, Bhadra 1372 Saka; *Samachar Sudhabarshan,* 31 December 1855, all in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, pp. 70–71, 89, 140.

[70] Uma Chakraborty, *Vedic Dasi*, p. 35.

[71] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 132.

[72] For more discussion on this aspect, see chapter 4.

the traditionalist elite of Hindu society had been upholding. It was natural therefore that this new reformist position would not find popular acceptance, unless sanctioned by the same elite. Even those who had realised that the reform was a social necessity could not raise their voices, as *Tattvabodhini Patrika* commented, for fear of either offending the *dalapatis* or inviting public censure.[73] This was because Vidyasagar and the other protagonists of reform, instead of trying to subvert the power structure of Hindu society, sought the patronage of both the *dalapati* and the pundit. Vidyasagar, for example, had accepted quite resignedly that in this country people had to behave according to the words and dictates of these great men who were the interpreters of *dharmashastra*.[74] So he went to Radhakanta Deb and his *dal* for support and appeared in a public debate to argue his case against the rival pundits. He won the first round and got a shawl and favour from the almighty *dalapati*. Victory would have been his if the situation had not changed. But soon the other *dalapatis* approached Deb and requested him to reconsider his decision to promote widow remarriage. Vidyasagar was called for a second round of debate and here he lost, or perhaps he was meant to lose. The decision of the *dalapati* was reversed[75] and with this the fate of the reform movement was also sealed. Even those pundits, who had earlier given a *vyavastha* in support of the marriage of the widowed daughter of Shyamacharan Das of Calcutta, now changed their mind and became opponents of widow remarriage.[76] And the common people could hardly muster enough courage to go against the *shastra* as interpreted to them by the pundits or defy the established customs as imposed upon them by the *dalapatis*.[77] No legislation had the power to break this 'massive chain'.

Vidyasagar, in other words, had opted for the traditionalists' method of reforming popular culture, that of initiating and imposing reform from above through the hierarchic structure of the *samaja*. Crucial for the success of this method was the support of the hegemonic power of the traditionalist elite, in whom he too had reposed his faith. His other movement against *kulin* polygamy was relatively more successful as it received the support of some influential leaders of

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[73] *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. IV, p. 157.
[74] Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, *Bidhaba Bibaha…Etadbishayak Prastab*, p. 16.
[75] For details see John McGuire, *The Making of the Colonial Mind,* p. 33.
[76] Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, *Bidhaba Bibaha…Etadbishayak Prastab*, pp. 15–16.
[77] *Sarbasubhakari Patrika*, no. 1, Bhadra 1772 Saka, in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra,* Vol. III, pp. 82–83, 88.

Hindu society, like the Maharaja of Burdwan, the Raja of Nadia and the Raja of Dinajpur. As *Friend of India* noted, the Raja of Nadia was 'to Hinduism what Sir Henri Inglis was to Church of England' and the Raja of Dinajpur was 'a Hindoo of Hindoos'.[78] But widow remarriage seemed to be too exotic a deviation from the established moral behavioural codes of Hinduism to enjoy the favour of these elites. In the nineteenth century cultural stereotype it appeared as a custom that violated the *shastra*; and it was complemented by another stereotype, that it was prevalent only among the lower orders. The *Hindu Intelligencer* wrote in 1855: 'This custom no longer prevails among the natives of the higher orders,… but it is still followed by those of the lower grades.'[79] For the *Samachar Sudhabarshan*, it was more specifically a custom of the '*antyaja*' [low born] castes, 'prevalent only among the Hadi, Methar, Dom, Chandal etc.'[80] Vidyasagar appeared to be proposing the adoption of a custom of the unclean castes, who were at the bottom of the social ladder, by the Brahmans and clean Sudras, who were the elite among the Bengali Hindus. He was asking the *bhadralok* to adopt a social practice that the *chotolok* (literally small people) had been pursuing since time immemorial. This must have looked like a reform of popular culture in the reverse direction—a 'counter reform'. The elite could only be expected to resist this effort.

The only alternative now left for Vidyasagar, which indeed he had already opted for, was to rely on a higher authority, the colonial state, and to go for a modernist strategy, to seek reform through legislation. But here too he showed significant misunderstanding of the universality of the power of the colonial state and its supposedly totalising modernity. He had been pleading for legislation perhaps with the assumption that the state and social authority were the two mutually validating reflections of the same hierarchy. But he crucially misconstrued the relations of power in nineteenth century Bengal, where the colonial state and the leaders of Hindu society still held sway over two mutually exclusive domains of power. The former occasionally tried to encroach upon the territory of the latter, but could never completely control it. Therefore, even if there was a law, there was

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[78] *Friend of India*, 17 July 1856, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 93.

[79] *Hindu Intelligencer,* 12 February 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 113.

[80] *Samachar Sudhabarshan*, 10 July 1855 and 15 September 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, pp. 134, 137.

no prospect of its ever being enforced without social consent. And this consent or social acquiescence of the people could only be ensured either through the support of the traditionalist elite or by completely breaking off what we have described as the 'massive chain' of caste. Vidyasagar was denied the first, and his mind, like that of most of his contemporaries was culturally so conditioned that he could not even think of opting for the second alternative. He operated essentially within the ideological and functional boundaries imposed by the dominant power structure of Hindu society. Herein lay the roots of his tragedy, his ideological ambivalence or we might say, the reasons for the 'unavoidable defeat' of his reform movement.

V

As a result of Vidyasagar's campaign for reform, the question of widow remarriage certainly became an issue of public concern as well as a subject of controversy. This had long term implications for Bengali society, as it became a symbol of honour for the traditionalist elite, the acceptance or rejection of which was thought to be inversely related to the diminution or continuance of their power. By taking the issue to the legislature Vidyasagar had renewed the conflict over the definition of the boundary between the two domains of power—that of the state on the one hand and of society on the other. The traditionalists had already lost the first battle when Rammohun had the custom of *sati* abolished through the intervention of the state. As the *Hindu Patriot* observed, the practice was discontinued only because it became 'penal at law'.[81] The leaders of Hindu society were no longer prepared to concede any further ground and the result was a stubborn resistance, which sometimes even lapsed into violence. This critical response to the bill pending before the Legislative Council was adequately reflected when the *Eastern Star* noted,

> …that the proposed legislative interference…is improper and quite uncalled for. The legislative body of the country, not being a representative assembly of the people for whom it legislates, is under the necessity of using great care and circumspection in the enactment of law.… The legislative council cannot compel the natives to marry their widows, but it proposes to fix the stamp of legitimacy on the children born of Hindu widows.… The community will continue to look upon

[81] *Hindu Patriot,* 15 February 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 117.

> them as bastards, and as persons not born in lawful wedlock. The legislature cannot coerce the opinions of men, nor influence their social relations, at least not directly.[82]

This statement clearly questioned the legitimacy of state power within the domain of social relations, where the will of the community was held to have been autonomous. This social opinion, as we have seen, was effectively manipulated by the powerful traditionalist elite group, and therefore, just as the *Samachar Darpan* had predicted four years before it was actually passed, there was no way to enforce it.[83] In the case of *sati,* what was being proposed was the abolition of an evil custom, which could be ensured through the intervention of the state. But widow remarriage was an innovation, indeed a revolutionary one, which could not be introduced by government fiat. The law therefore remained a dead letter for several decades after Vidyasagar's death.

Another point to be mentioned about this reform movement is the marginality of women in the whole process. While Vidyasagar had started his movement out of a sense of compassion for the young widows, what followed subsequently was a battle for a cultural symbol, in which the plight of the widows had become a subsidiary concern for both the contending parties. It was never a concern for the opponents of the reform, and even Vidyasagar's sympathetic self was often overshadowed by his anxieties over the falling standards of moral discipline in society. And in the scriptural polemics, women did not even figure as objects. In the nineteenth or the early twentieth century social world of Bengal, women had not as yet emerged as conscious subjects of history, trying to assert their own rights. If *Bamabodhini Patrika* represented the only feminine voice raised in support of the reform, it too accepted in a resigned mood the futility of the endeavour.[84] And none of the champions of widow remarriage ever thought of mobilising women's opinion in favour of the reform, not to speak of involving them as active participants in the actual reform process. Individual or independent voices of women, either in support of the reform or against it, have remained unrecorded, confirming only their marginality in this crucial social debate in

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[82] *Eastern Star*, 8 December 1855, in B. Ghosh, *Selections from English Periodicals*, Vol. III, p. 137.
[83] B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, p. 71.
[84] *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Sraban 1277 B.S., in B. Ghosh, *Samajchitra*, Vol. III, pp. 166–67.

colonial Bengal. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the reform movement denied women their 'subjecthood/agency' by locating their suffering in their body, rather than in their mind or inner feelings.[85]

The legal status of Hindu widows in Bengal was gradually diminishing throughout the colonial period. During the early days of the Company's rule the courts still applied the Hindu law in civil matters, that did not allow a widow any right to inherit her deceased husband's property. She could have, under the *Dayabhaga* school of Hindu law that was applicable in Bengal, only usufruct right on behalf of her infant sons, and increasingly her access to *stridhan* or bridal gifts was also restrained,[86] thus reducing her to a state of being a perpetual financial burden on the matrimonial or in many cases on her natal family. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 legalised marriages for widows, but did not make their conditions any better. On the contrary, as Lucy Carroll has argued, the legislation was intrinsically conservative in its teleological undertone, as on remarriage it disinherited the widows of all claims to their deceased husband's property, and thus endorsed the Brahmanical norm of rewarding only 'the chaste, prayerful widow'.[87] However, for the widows themselves, most of them being untouched by the economic rationalism of a colonial modernity, legal rights or economic dependence were less of a problem, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued on the basis of autobiographical evidence. More heartbreaking to them was their exteriorisation from the family and the deprivation of all claims to its affection and protection. While Chakrabarty does not deny the importance of rights, he does not feel that a generalised legal solution would have solved every individual widow's cry for affection.[88] While it is difficult to deny the value of this argument about individuation of emotional needs, particularly when the provision of secured rights has not ameliorated the conditions of all Hindu widows even today, one important question however still remains. Was the problem of widows in post-1856 Bengal a problem of individuals and should we therefore look for particularistic explanations? Or is a more generalised explanation possible for this withdrawal of affection by the Bengali Hindu extended families?

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[85] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 131–33.
[86] T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, pp. 19–20.
[87] Lucy Carroll, 'Law, Custom, and Statutory Social Reform: the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1983, p. 379.
[88] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, pp. 105–14.

In Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the sorrows and sufferings of the widows attracted a lot of attention in the printed public space. The character of the widow featured prominently in Bengali fiction, a modern literary genre, which has been recently studied in depth by Rajat Ray and Dipesh Chakrabarty,[89] and here we may only briefly restate some of their arguments to make an observation about the general plight of Hindu widows in post-Vidyasagar Bengal. First of all, as it appears from the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Tarasankar Banerjee, the condition of abject poverty and the heartless cruelty of deceitful in-laws, which Saradasundari Debi, the widowed mother of the social reformer Kesab Sen, experienced after her husband's death,[90] were not the common fate shared by all widows in Bengal. Narratives of sympathy and outrage at the conditions of widows abound in the printed Bengali literature of this period. And in the novels some of them are also imagined to have exerted considerable authority and influence within the power structure of the Hindu extended family. One important example of this is certainly the character of Shailaja, the widowed aunt in Tarasankar's *Dhatridevata* (1939). What is more important is that, in this literary imagination the widow transcends her body and is endowed with a mind that has emotions and is capable of falling in love with another man. But this love does not find fulfilment in the narrow confines of an arranged marriage, abiding by the rules of caste and patriarchy. The obvious examples of such characters surrendering their desires to a social compromise are of course Binodini in Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1903), Rama in Sarat Chandra's *Palli Samaj* (1916) and Savitri in his *Charitrahin* (1917). Chakrabarty sees in this emotional sacrifice 'a case of complete subordination of the individual to society.'[91] For Ray, love is sublimated in *viraha* or parting and ultimately in *bhava-sammilan*, which he translates as 'union in spirit and not in flesh'.[92] However, what we observe here is that the Bengali fiction of this period adequately reflected the dilemmas of a Bengali modernity, their new consciousness, which remained tormented by contradictory conventions of love and gender equality on the one hand, and

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[89] Rajat K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (New Delhi: 2001); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 133–34.
[90] See for details, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, pp. 107–10.
[91] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 133.
[92] Rajat K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History*, p. 111.

caste and patriarchy on the other. Love and the relationship between man and woman were thus conceptualised in ways that were fundamentally different from those of the West. In this emotional—epistemological world, widow remarriage as a social reform remained an exotic idea as it was in Vidyasagar's time.

In a society where spiritualism was still valued over material culture and renunciation was privileged as the highest ideal of human behaviour, it was easy to legitimise ascetic widowhood as a model of spiritual renunciation and socialise women into accepting this noble ideal of self-denial and sacrifice. In her reminiscences of household life in her family, published in 1901, Prasannomoyee Debi describes the condition of the widows in the following glowing language of adoration:

> The widows wore the marks of white [the colour of sacrifice] sandal paste on their forehead; with their disciplined life, wearing white garments, with thin bodies, emaciated by the performance of sacred rites, they were the true renouncer [*brahmacharini*], looking like the beautiful goddess Mahasweta [another name of Saraswati, the goddess of learning, who also dresses in white], full of compassion, bearing the burden of widowhood with a smiling face, they dedicated their lives to the nurturing of the sick and caring for everyone in the household.[93]

Such aestheticisation of the image of ascetic widowhood in the early twentieth century indicates clearly the degree of adulation Hindu society had for such a model. And then, as Tanika Sarkar has argued, the nation needed the ascetic widow, as in the nationalist semiotics she symbolised the purity of a culture uncontaminated by colonial subordination.[94] This image received further legitimacy when Gandhi elevated the Hindu widow, renouncing sexuality and sacrificing worldly pleasures, to a higher moral pedestal, being the highest ideal of the spiritually superior Indian womanhood.[95] The widow thus became the most authentic symbol of the essence of Hinduism, situated at the sanctum sanctorum of the nationalist shrine of sacred icons. The whole idea of remarriage in this cultural environment sounded like a humiliating surrender to a totalising colonial modernity.

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[93] Prasannomoyee Debi, *'Sekaler Katha',* in A. Sen and A. Bhattacharya (eds), *Sekele Katha: Satak Suchanay Meyeder Smritikatha* (Calcutta: 1997), p. 17.
[94] T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, pp. 41–42.
[95] See Sujata Patel, 'Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi', in A. Thorner and M. Krishnaraj (eds), *Ideals, Images and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History* (Hyderabad: 2000), p. 313.

VI

It is no wonder therefore that the model of ascetic widowhood became an ideal for an ever-growing number of castes at the turn of the last century. As the elite portrayed it as one of the authentic symbols of the culture of the respectable and an icon for the pride of the nation, the socially mobile sections of the lower orders also readily appropriated it. There were of course some among the educated members of the lower castes, who had notionally accepted the rationale of this innovative social reform; but they too shared the same patriarchal and moralist concerns,[96] and refrained from practicing it in real life. Neither could they popularise the reform movement among their respective communities, because of the obvious socio-cultural compulsions to adopt the dominant elite's behavioural codes, defined by the ideology of hierarchy. In other words, the process, which we have described as the reform of popular culture, contributed further to the universalising of the cultural value of celibate widowhood. It was here that traditional culture managed to retain its autonomy despite the pressures of the power/knowledge system of a reforming colonial modernity. Not only did it effectively resist a rationalist reform, but it also managed to normalise its gender ideology among a wider section of the community. We may briefly note here some of the nuances of this cultural universalising process.

The 1891 census list of castes that forbade widow remarriage, as we have noted already, included a variety of intermediate peasant and trading castes.[97] Dalit groups like the Namasudras, who permitted this practice earlier, began to discontinue it towards the turn of the century. In the early decades of the twentieth century, a Namasudra widow who observed celibacy, ate a single vegetarian meal a day, fasted once a month and always veiled herself thereby avoiding the male gaze, was certainly an object of social adoration.[98] Like their higher caste counterparts, the women of these intermediate and lower castes also internalised this orthodox male worldview; they not

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[96] Balaram Sarkar, *Namasudra Jnanabhandar* (Faridpur: 1911), pp. 80–83.

[97] *Census of India*, 1891, Vol. III, The Report, p. 267; *Census of India* 1901, Vol. VI, Part I, p. 250; *Census of India* 1911, Vol. V, Part I, p. 321; H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I (1891, reprint, Calcutta, 1981), p. 187; N. K. Bose, *The Structure of Hindu Society*, translated from Bengali by Andre Beteille (New Delhi: 1975), p. 158; *Mahishya Samaj*, Ashadh 1318 B.S.

[98] Tarini Charan (Haldar) Bhaktibhushan, *Sre Sree Nabakrishna Charit* (Barisal: 1325 B.S.), pp. 24–25.

only accepted and promoted the dominant Hindu stereotypes of womanhood, but also abhorred the idea of widow remarriage. The *Mahishya Mahila*, a monthly journal for Mahishya women, edited by Krishnabhabini Biswas, is an ideal example at hand.[99] The Subarnabanik Mahila Sammilani, the first ever conference of about 500 women of the Subarnabanik caste, was held in December 1925 under the supervision of the male members of the community. It discussed strategies for the spread of female education and other issues concerning women, but did not dare to include widow remarriage in its agenda.[100] By this time it was a taboo shared by a wide range of social groups. An editorial in *Mahishya Samaj* in 1911 indicates the universalising of the practice of celibate widowhood in no uncertain terms:

> It is only the ignorant who thinks that only a Brahman woman is supposed to observe *brahmacharya* (ascetism) at her widowhood.... It is a compulsory practice for the widows of all the varnas. By performing this dharma they can attain salvation and get a worthy husband in the next life. This is a blessing of our ancient Aryan sages that will be bestowed on them.[101]

The quotation above reveals some important aspects of the ideological baggage that went into this universalising process. First of all, it was believed to be a dharma (spiritual duty) enjoying scriptural sanction emanating from 'our ancient Aryan sages'. And then it affirmed the absolute control of the husband over the body and soul of his wife. An article in the same issue of the *Mahishya Samaj* in 1911 spells it out more clearly. 'Who is a *bidhaba?*' (the Bengali term for widow)—asks the author Pulin Behari Chaudhuri. And his answer is: 'Who has lost in this life her *dhaba* or her only protector and nurturer, her husband'. But Hindu marriage, he argues, is not just for this mortal life—it is a physical as well as spiritual union and therefore it is not severed by the death of the husband. Yet, such a catastrophe puts the wife in great distress, as without her husband she may behave like a 'horse without a rider' or a 'boat without a helmsman', as many women find it difficult to control their physical passion. This brings in the need for *brahmacharya* or ascetism, a life of complete austerity and self-denial, which is a device to keep the

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[99] For more discussion on *Mahishya Mahila*, see chapter 4.
[100] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Paush 1333 B.S.
[101] Editorial note by Sebananda Bharati, *Mahishya Samaj*, Ashadh 1318 B.S.

physical desires in check.[102] It is interesting to note that the same Hindu masculinist anxiety regarding uncontrollable female sexuality and the fear of scandal and moral anarchy resulting from it, which were used in support of the reform of widow remarriage, were now being invoked to rationalise ascetic widowhood! It perhaps makes it evident how the lower orders of Hindu society also shared the dominant Hindu male concern for the harnessing of female sexuality, either by channeling it into marriage or by disciplining it through the imposition of moral codes of behaviour.

And the modernising process further exacerbated this anxiety. In western societies where widow remarriage was in vogue, argued another article in the same *Mahishya Samaj* a year later, it only served to further whet the female sexual appetite and encouraged even a 60-year old woman to take a new husband! Such tendencies are never beneficial for society and lead to serious moral crises.[103] In other words, nothing was more subversive of patriarchy than the complete freedom of women to choose their husbands as many times as they preferred to. The article takes comfort at the fact that since Vidyasagar was not successful in his mission, the local social reformers of the later years would not be able to bring down society to such nether levels of endemic social scandals. In this society, the article further argues, local custom is more revered than the *shastra.* So what is not sanctioned by local custom, even though it is enjoined by the ancient texts, would never be acceptable.[104] In other words, in this Mahishya opposition to widow remarriage, we hear the echoes of the same argument, which the traditionalist Hindu elite had been invoking in the mid-nineteenth century to contest Vidyasagar's reformist discourse of textuality. The metaphor of a gift was a central idea to the structure of such local customs and rituals of a Bengali Hindu marriage: after the gift of a virgin (*sampradana*), the woman became the member of her husband's lineage, responsible for giving birth to sons to maintain the male line (*bangsha*).[105] It is, therefore, a sin, argued the same article, to take back a gift once given to

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[102] Pulin Behari Chaudhuri, *'Bidhabar Brahmacharya'*, *Mahishya Samaj*, Ashadh 1318 B.S.

[103] Satyabrata, *'Darshan, itihas o samajtattva'*, *Mahishya Samaj*, Bhadra 1329 B.S.

[104] *Ibid.*.

[105] For more details on Bengali marriage rituals, see Lina Fruzzetti, *The Gift of a Virgin: Women, Marriage and Ritual in a Bengali Society*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: 1982).

someone and give it away again to somebody else.[106] A wife in this discourse thus becomes a possession, the sole utility of which lay in the reproduction and immortalisation of the male line. Nothing could be closer to the patriarchal gender codes of dominant Brahmanism.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that there was complete consensus among these lower castes about such Hindu teleological constructions of patriarchy and womanhood. Such positions were also contested from within, although this contestation shared the same dilemmas that marked the other reformist campaigns of the period. An article published in *Mahishya Samaj* in 1921 argued that the textual evidence, which Vidyasagar had marshaled in favour of the reform, had not been refuted by anyone in the intervening period, and no one would be able to do that in future. So the desirability of the reform was irrefutable, if not for anything else, at least for preventing foeticide and arresting the demographic decline of the Hindus.[107] The argument thus not only reflected the old Hindu moral anxiety of the mid-nineteenth century, but also embodied the Hindu nationalist eugenicist concerns of the early twentieth. A year later *Mahishya Samaj* published another article, which argued with textual evidence from *Manu Samhita*, *Jajnabalkya Samhita* and *Parasara Samhita*, that widow remarriage was sanctioned in the *shastras* under certain conditions, and the sons born of such marriages could legitimately perform the last rites of their parents and inherit property. But this very reformist argument, it appears, also emanated from a patriarchal apprehension, as the author recommended marriage only for those widows who were unable to endure the life of a *bhramacharini*.[108]

In this lower caste discourse women alone were not being held responsible for a possible sexual anarchy. Another article with a provocative title '*Purusher brahmacharya*' (ascetism for men) sounded radical when it argued that men too should learn to discipline their sexual passion and follow moral codes, for it was they who were responsible for immoral sexual relationships in society. It was improper to solely blame vulnerable widows who fell prey to the seductive ploys of depraved young men. Yet, what is interesting to note is that the author's suggested remedy was not to free women from the burden of *brahmacharya,* but to impose the same codes of discipline on males as well. Ascetic widowhood remains a social model that

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[106] Satyabrata, *'Darshan, itihas o samajtattva'*.

[107] *'Dhvangsonmukh jatir raksha', Mahishya Samaj*, Phalgun 1328 B.S.

[108] Girijakanta Goswamy, *'Brahmacharjye asakta bidhabar bibaha'*, in *Mahishya Samaj*, Jyaishtha 1329 B.S.

cannot be tampered with.[109] Women's voices, once again, were rare in this debate, except that of *Mahishya Mahila*, which upheld the conservative Hindu model of chaste womanhood and banned widow remarriage. But there were some exceptions too, who could see through the society's deceptions and raised a voice against the gender inequities. A poem *'Bala Bidhaba'* (child widow), written by a woman poet, Pushparani Dasi appeared in *Subarnabanik Patrika* in 1925. Describing the hapless plight of an infant widow, the poem concludes, 'Ascetism, rituals and fasting—these are all for you, men have no such worries—they have only pleasure and luxury'.[110]

However, Pushparani's articulation of protest against the gendered inequities of Hindu society had little effect on the leaders of her Subarnabanik community, who had accepted the futility of any reform in this direction. Since Vidyasagar himself had failed to popularise widow remarriage, an article in *Subarnabanik Samachar* argued in self-justification, what else could they be expected to do?[111] But just because they were reluctant to pursue this particular social reform does not necessarily mean that the Subarnabaniks or others who shared their sentiments were totally anti-modern in their attitude to the widow question. Instead of wasting time on such a futile reformist campaign, which they knew would have difficulty succeeding in view of the general opposition from Hindu society, they decided to redirect their resources to other public welfare projects for widows. In view of the abject poverty and distress of many widows, arising from their total economic dependence on and, often exploitation by, their husbands' families, a few caste associations like the Bangiya Subarnabanik Sammilani, or the Sutradhar Samiti of Jessore and Nadia, started charitable funds and community organisations which helped destitute widows with finance, shelter and other material assistance.[112] Such economic welfare projects, however, do not appear to have been very successful, as, to the dismay of many of its protagonists, 10 years after its formal launching the project was finally abandoned by the Subarnabanik Sammilani in its 1926 session.[113]

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[109] Abinash Chandra Das, *'Purusher Brahmacharya'*, *Mahishya Samaj*, Karttik 1318 B.S.

[110] Pushparani Dasi, *'Bala Bidhaba'*, *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Karttik 1332 B.S.

[111] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1323 B.S.

[112] *Karya Bibarani, Bangiya Subarnabanik Sammilani* (Calcutta: 1323 B.S.), p. 12; Mahadebchandra Ray, *Jasohar O Nadia Sutradhar Samaj ba Samiti* (Chuadanga: 1333 B.S.), p. 5.

[113] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1333 B.S.

Moreover, such a generalised approach could hardly be expected to resolve the emotional problems of the child widows, whose plight therefore remained a major moral dilemma for many of these caste organisations in the early twentieth century. This motivated some of the Sadgops, Baruis, Gandhabaniks, Jogis, Rajbansis and Namasudras to promote widow remarriage for minors, particularly for those whose marriages had not been consummated. Some of the more progressives among the Jogis and Sadgops even succeeded in arranging a few such weddings.[114] But this did not mean that such symbolic action made this reform more acceptable among the members of their respective communities. And often such debates tore the communities apart. At the 1922 session of the Bengal Namasudra Conference, attended by 10,000–11,000 people, the major bone of contention was the proposed reform of widow remarriage. Its supporters, about 500 in all, were vastly outnumbered by its opponents, and were physically heckled and driven out of the meeting, which ultimately ended in pandemonium.[115]

In other words, nearly 70 years after the passage of the Act of 1856 there was a near total consensus in Bengali Hindu society on the rejection of widow remarriage as a social reform. Nothing could be a more eloquent signifier of the 'defeat' of Vidyasagar's reform movement. But can we not deduce more from this metaphor of defeat? Whose defeat it really was and if it was a battle for cultural symbols, who was victorious? Vidyasagar obviously took it as a personal defeat and in frustration spent the last days of his life in the company of the Santals—away from Hindu society, which had refused to listen to his call for reform. But it was not just in Bengal that the reform movement to introduce widow remarriage had failed—it received the same stubborn and effective Hindu resistance in Maharashtra, south India and the Punjab.[116] It was therefore the defeat of a colonial modernity, of

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[114] *Jogisakha,* Baisakh, Jaistha, Ashadh and Sraban 1312 B.S.; Paush 1315 B.S.; Agrahayan 1327 B.S.; Bhadra, Paush 1330 B.S.*; Kshatriya*, Chaitra 1332 B.S.; *Sadgop Patrika*, Baisakh 1330 B.S.; Sraban, Paush 1337 B.S.; *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1327 B.S.; *Gandhabanik*, Karttik, Agrahayan 1330 B.S.; *Bangiyo Vaishya Barujibi Sabhar Chatirdas Barshik Karyabibaran* (Jessore: 1915), p. 55; Nabinchandra Ghosh, *Gopjatir Kshatriattva* (Mymensingh: 1331 B.S.), p. 60.

[115] For details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (Richmond, Surrey: 1997), pp. 121–23.

[116] C. H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton: 1964), pp. 87–88; R. O'Hanlon, 'Issues of Widowhood: Gender and Resistance in Colonial Western India', in D. Haynes and G. Prakash (eds), *Contesting Power:*

the power/knowledge of the colonial state, which failed to appropriate that autonomous cultural space, which a traditionalist Brahmanical elite had preserved for itself as its own domain of power. The strength of a customary usage and the spiritual aestheticisation of ascetic widowhood ultimately triumphed over a rationalist modernity that sought to confer on women the equal right to choose their conjugal partners. Only a handful of widows could gather enough courage to claim this right, which their community was not yet ready to grant them. The dreadful spectre of losing caste or the attractive possibility of gaining in social respectability made the reform unacceptable to an ever-growing number of groups within the Hindu community.

The ideological ambivalence of the reformers themselves—as they stood at the crossroad between modernity and tradition—further weakened the reformist campaign. This meant that their acceptance of the modernist epistemology of reform without challenging the power structure of the Hindu society put their reform endeavour in danger and strengthened the position of the traditionalist elite, who continued their unhindered control over popular culture. The Brahmanical gender codes, as a result, were in the process of being reproduced at other levels of Hindu society as well. This does not mean that the lower castes blindly followed the Brahmanical fiat or excluded modernity from all spheres of their lives. The gender issue figured in their caste movements in a much more complex way than we can negotiate in a straightforward narrative of Brahmanical hegemony or an unproblematised discourse of modernisation. This issue of heterogeneity in lower caste modernisation in colonial Bengal we will address in the next chapter.

Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia (New Delhi: 1991), pp. 67–69; U. Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi: 1998), pp. 81–94; A. Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: Reconstructing Class in Colonial Punjab* (New Delhi: 2002), pp. 104–05.

4

Caste and Gender

Social Mobility and the Status of Women

I

From very early on, the 'women's question' and the 'caste question' featured prominently in the colonial discourse on India, as empire was legitimised as a civilising project, taking the Western post-Enlightenment modernity as the epitome of perfection and the ideal for progress for other inferior civilisations. In this civilisational discourse the Indians faired badly as they did not treat their women well.[1] It is no wonder therefore that women became the target of a reformist agenda in the first half of the nineteenth century for modernising Indian intellectuals trying to respond to this damning Western critique. Thus female infanticide was banned, *sati* was abolished and widow remarriage was legalised. But it is well known that the actual social impact of these reforms was limited.

In pre-colonial India, as Romila Thapar has argued, the status of women varied widely, from 'a position of considerable authority and freedom to one of equally considerable subservience.'[2] The absence

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[1] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Difference-Defferal of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British India', in D. Arnold and D. Hardiman (eds), *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha* (New Delhi: 1994), p. 54.

[2] Romila Thapar, 'Looking Back in History', in D. Jain (ed.), *Indian Women* (New Delhi: 1975), p. 7.

of freedom was more a problem of the high caste women following a Brahmanical gender code, than among the lower castes and untouchables, for whom the very existential compulsions and demand for productive labour broke the barriers of unfreedom that enchained their caste superiors. In other words, in the colonial teleological construction of the 'women's question', the maladies of the upper castes were stereotyped as the problems of Indian womanhood in general. One could argue therefore that the compassion of the individual reformers notwithstanding, these reform movements were attempts by the Hindu high caste patriarchy to reclaim their control over the private space, to seize the initiative to reform it, and thereby to live up to the standards of rationality prescribed by the colonial modernising project.

However, there is no reason to believe that there was an absolute consensus on this particular aspect of colonial modernity. In every such case of organised social reform in the nineteenth century, opposition came from some leaders of the caste Hindu society, who refused to surrender their autonomy to the power–knowledge system of the colonial regime. This resistance ultimately boiled over as a powerful Hindu backlash against the Age of Consent Bill, symbolising a reformist state intervention in the private sphere, stirred up strong nationalist passions in 1891.[3] But this was not a binary contest between the modernists and the anti-modernists. Radhakanta Deb, who was against the abolition of *sati* and was ambivalent on widow remarriage, was, however, an ardent supporter of female education. Deb's autonomy lay in his will to choose between various aspects of colonial modernity and not to accept it as a package. But where Rammohun Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Radhakanta Deb, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and William Bentick all shared common ground was in initiating a process that universalised the conditions and problems of women, with suggested or contested generalised remedies. The Brahmanical gender code—with or without reform—now came to be projected as the code of conduct for all women, ignoring and thus gradually teasing out the significant 'differences' that remained in the status of women across the caste hierarchy.

The women's question remained closely related to the caste question in this colonial reformist discourse. As we have seen in the case of widow remarriage, the fear of losing caste acted as the major

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[3] See for details, Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (London: 2001).

deterrent against any popular acceptance of the reforms. The Orientalist scholars, immersed in classical textual studies, projected the caste system as the most authentic form of Indian social organisation. Its behavioural prescriptions, they thought, governed every aspect of Hindu social life. It is no wonder that the caste system was construed to be the most obvious sign of Indian backwardness. It was, wrote James Mill in his *History of British India* in 1817, 'a system of priestcraft, built upon the most enormous and tormenting superstition that ever harassed and degraded any portion of mankind.'[4] Such views were further strengthened by the missionary observers like M. A. Sherring who continued to argue that caste was 'opposed to intellectual freedom', with 'its face sternly against progress'.[5] Yet, instead of reforming or undermining it, the colonial state legitimised it, reinforced it and universalised it through its structures of knowledge, institutions and policies. Earlier critical views were soon replaced by attitudes of approbation in the later Orientalist scholarship and in the official ethnographic surveys, which found in the caste system the most authentic essence of Indian culture and sought to use that knowledge in ensuring more effective governance of the subject society.[6] Eugene Irschick has argued that this colonial discourse on the indigenous society was constructed through a process of 'dialogic production', where the local informants provided significant input.[7] The most important aspect of this dialogue was that it almost invariably took place with the Brahman or other high caste local elites with textual knowledge. As a result, what came to pass as a colonial discourse on Indian culture was actually a view derived through the prism of the Brahmans and the higher castes—regarded as the 'leaders of the native society' by the government.[8] In a social milieu legitimated by such an official discourse, caste remained the most effective index of status and the Brahmanic

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[4] Quoted in Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, Oxford: 2001), p. 33.

[5] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 47.

[6] I have discussed various aspects of the evolution of a colonial sociology of Bengal in my earlier work, S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal, 1872–1937* (Calcutta: 1991), chapter 1; for a more recent and comprehensive discussion on an all-India canvas, see Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

[7] Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795–1895* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 1994), pp. 9–10 and passim.

[8] Quoted in S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 35; recently, Sumit Sarkar has also emphasised this point; see his *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (New Delhi: 2002), p. 57 and passim.

or upper caste models continued to be the referral points for respectable social behaviour. When the colonial justice system in all private matters, such as marriage, adoption and inheritance, concerning the Hindus applied the *dharmashastra*, and the courts were guided by the interpretation of the law as provided by Brahman pundits, it created a clear imperative for everyone to conform to the injunctions of Brahmanism (see first chapter).

There was now, in other words, a compulsion for the middle-ranking peasant and trading castes, who owned property and were concerned about inheritance and succession, to follow the rules of marriage as prescribed by the Brahman lawgivers. In course of time, such considerations began to affect the dalit groups as well. As the colonial state matured and sought to bring a myriad groups into its network of supporters, there occured greater diffusion of wealth and education across caste lines. When some of the dalits began to acquire property or subinfeudatory rights in the land, they too felt compelled to abandon their previous, more ambiguous, modes of family structure and follow the Brahmanical codes of marriage and patriarchy, having a distinctive impact on the status of their women, who had previously enjoyed more autonomy and freedom. To put it in a different way, as owners of property, they now felt compelled to have 'legal' heirs and hence felt the compulsion to control female sexuality and reproductive power and maintain a patriarchal family structure, which previously were the concerns mainly of the property-owning Brahmans and the upper castes.

As the 'ethnographic state'[9] produced more knowledge about the upper caste models of womanhood and ritual behaviour, and legitimised the caste hierarchy and its associated ethical conduct through its decennial census reports and ethnographic surveys, and thus strengthened the position of the 'Raja–pundit nexus'—as we metaphorically described the power elites of Hindu society in the first chapter—there was an even greater imperative towards the universalising of such gender codes. Following the rules of Brahmanical patriarchy now became a symbol of status for an increasing number of socially mobile groups. In other words, there was now an increased tendency on the part of the middle peasant and trading castes and dalit groups to reproduce Brahmanical gender codes within their communities. In this chapter we shall explore the various aspects of this inverse relationship between social mobility and the status of women by

[9] This is a description used by Dirks in his *Castes of Mind*.

focusing on the changing social behavioural patterns of some of these groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal.

II

Before we get into any discussion on the changing behaviour of the socially mobile castes, it will be pertinent here to say a few words about Brahmanical gender codes and their relationship with the epistemology of caste as it prevailed in Bengali Hindu society. There is little scope for an indigenist argument that gender relations in the pre-colonial period, uncontaminated by modernity, were better and more egalitarian than under colonial rule. In Hindu society, the central organising principle of caste hierarchy came to be integrally connected to the ideology of patriarchy, as maintenance of ritual purity was related to the concept of 'composite' substance, as Ronald Inden puts it, 'consisting of human bodily substance combined with worship, territorial, or occupational substance'. Each *jati* or caste was divided into clans or *kula*, defined by such composite substances, into *gotra* which was another synonym for clan defined by Vedic ancestors' names and into *bangsha* or the male line, representing the bodily substance. These composite substances of a *jati* were transmitted to the progeny through reproduction: through semen and uterine blood.[10] And here the role of women became crucial, as they had the burden of maintaining the continuity of the patriarchal line or *bangsha* and thus the purity of the *jati*. It was therefore essential to control female sexuality and reproductive agency. Hence caste stood on the bedrock of endogamy that protected ritual rank by preventing impurity through miscegenation. These eugenicistic concerns of a caste society put various restrictions on women. For women access to Vedic ritual rites was only through their husbands, as for the Sudras it was through their masters. While the public space became the sphere of activity for men, women were confined to the household. The ancient lawgiver Manu prescribed a permanent dependent status for women, to be protected by their fathers, husbands and sons at different stages of their lives. However, this was a code of conduct for the twice-born *varnas*: the Brahmans, Kshatriya and Vaisyas. The Sudras, as they were gradually drawn into this *varna* system, also began to give up

[10] For more discussion on this, see Ronald Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture* (New Delhi: 1976), pp. 15–28.

their libertarian tribal cultural mores and adopt the more structured and authoritative codes of conduct prescribed by the Brahmanical religion, as these were crucial for defining their own position within the ritual hierarchy.

But the rigours of the *varnashram dharma* and its prescriptions varied from region to region depending on various historical factors. In Bengal in the early medieval period, as Kunal Chakrabarti has shown, Brahmanism gradually established its hegemony by incorporating the local religious traditions like the worship of indigenous goddesses and transmitting its ideas through *bratas*, a local tradition of religious rites collectively performed to achieve specific purposes. The establishment of this hegemony upon the bedrock of the caste system, comes through clearly in the textual evidence of the *upapuranas,* composed between the eighth and thirteenth centuries A.D.[11] However, this hegemony had to continually appropriate local dissent and absorb the destabilising influences of various social and political upheavals. In medieval Bengal the political ascendancy of Buddhism and the social influence of the *bhakti* movement watered down some of the extreme and oppressive features of the caste system. But in the sixteenth century there was again another Brahmanical reaction, as reflected in the *Navyasmriti* literature of this period in which we find a concerted conservative attempt to re-establish the disciplines and rigours of the *varnashram dharma*.[12]

The most important exponent of this new *smriti* tradition was Raghunandan, whose *Astabingsatitattva* defined afresh the codes of behaviour that would form the lines of demarcation between the castes. To refurbish this exclusivist ethos, the one aspect of the life cycle of an individual to which he attached the utmost importance was marriage and like many other *smritikaras* before him, for example, Bhavadevabhatta, Sulopani or Srinathacharya, he stressed the view that the major purpose of marriage was the reproduction, as far as the Brahmans were concerned, of 'pure' bodily substance. The elaborate rules and rituals that he prescribed for his fellow Brahmans were therefore mostly related to marriage and childbirth. As women were the conduits of the bodily purity of the caste, he prescribed pre-pubertal marriage and emphasised the ban on inter-caste marriage. Raghunandan's other eugenicist anxiety centred on

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[11] See Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Processes: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (New Delhi: 2001).

[12] For more details on this see S. Bandyopadhyay *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 8–10.

the sexual vulnerability of widows, who were supposedly prone to promiscuity and, therefore, unbridled freedom for them might lead to indiscipline and sexual dystopia. They were consequently guarded against their own vulnerability with numerous restrictions on dress, food, movement and even through, although Raghunandan did not actually press for it, *sati*.[13]

However, these were the codes prescribed only for the Brahmans and later for the Baidyas and the Kayasthas, as together they came to constitute the historical *uchchhajati* or the higher caste group of Bengal from around the thirteenth century.[14] For other castes, as we have seen in the previous chapter, there was still in existence various types of widow remarriage until about the late nineteenth century. And about inter-caste marriage, even though hypogamy or *pratiloma* marriage (of an upper caste woman with a lower caste man) was despised, hypergamy or *anuloma* marriage (of a lower caste woman with an upper caste man) was prevalent among the Sudra castes. Children born of such marriages were not regarded as illegitimate or outcastes, but were relocated within the *varna* hierarchy as *varna-sankara jatis* or mixed castes. Indeed the two thirteenth–fourteenth century Puranas, the *Brahmavaivarttapurana* and *Brihatdharmapurana*, place the majority of the castes of Bengal in this category.[15] Hypergamy survived the reformist onslaught of the sixteenth century *smriti* literature, evidence of that being the custom of 'bride-price' (the groom paying the father of the bride), which Raghunandan despised, but which still prevailed among some of the Sudra castes of Bengal even in the nineteenth century.[16]

These differences in marriage customs were however on their way out as social mobility took place, though on a limited scale, among the middle and lower castes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As status was still being defined and expressed in the language of caste, which enjoyed both official legitimacy and social

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[13] Bani Chakraborti, *Samaj-sanskarak Raghunandan*, second edn (Calcutta: 1970), pp. 111–22, 206–08.

[14] See Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1981), p. 37.

[15] See S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj,* pp. 5–6, 9.

[16] I am drawing here on the wisdom of Anshu Malhotra, who has argued for Punjab that one of the reasons for the prevalence of 'bride price' among the lower castes was the scarcity of marriageable women among these groups resulting from the popular custom of hypergamy. This on the other side of the scale created a demand for higher caste men for marriage, resulting in the increasing demands for dowry at these levels of society. Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (New Delhi: 2002), pp. 48–53.

currency, upwardly mobile individuals, who had entered into the hallowed circle of the *bhadralok,* began to emulate the cultural and ritual practices of the upper castes who constituted the majority within this social category and who with all intent upheld their caste privileges. This behaviour, which we usually describe, *a la* M. N. Srinivas, as 'Sanskritisation', was further legitimated by the emergence in the late nineteenth century of a 'revivalist–nationalist discourse', as Tanika Sarkar has described it, in which 'nationalism became more precisely defined… as the rule of Brahmanical patriarchy.'[17]

This reform of marriage rules and associated gender codes did not take place at an individual level; it was done as a collective endeavour through various caste associations, using their own vernacular print media. The result was the progressive loss of freedom for women of the middle peasant and trading castes and some of the dalit groups. It has been argued that this organic connection between caste, gender inequality and social mobility could only be broken when organised caste movements could defy the cultural hegemony of the caste system, as had happened in the case of the Satya Sodhak Samaj under the leadership of Jotiba Phule in Maharashtra[18] or the Self-respect Movement under the leadership of 'Periyar' E. V. Ramaswami Naicker in Tamil Nadu.[19] In Bengal there were caste movements, such as those among the Tilis, Jogis, Napits and the Namasudras, which at various stages had demanded the destruction of the caste system and had stood for social equality.[20] But ultimately, none of them could break away from caste or the Sanskritisation process, and, therefore, the equality they demanded turned out to be an exclusively male equality. Mukunda Behari Mullick, one of the front ranking leaders of the Namasudra movement, in his oral deposition before the Indian Statutory Commission in 1928, demanded voting rights only for men.

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[17] For more details on this discourse, see T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*; the quotation is from p. 209.

[18] Uma Chakraborty, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi: 1998), pp. 57, 65, 76–78.

[19] M. S. S. Pandian, '"Denationalising" the Past: "Nation" in E. V. Ramaswamy's Political Discourse', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 October 1993, pp. 2282–87.

[20] See *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Aswin-Kartik, Magh-Falgun, 1333 B.S.; Jaishtha-Asadh, 1334 B.S.; *Modak Hitaishini*, Asadh 1339 B.S.; *Jogisakha*, Agrahayan 1327 B.S.; Baisakh 1331 B.S.; *Bangiya Vaishya Barujibi Sabhar Ashtadas Barshik Karya Bibaran* (Jessore: 1920), p. 68; Kedarnath Sil, *Swaraj Sadhanay Narasundar Sanmaj* (Sirajganj: 1331 B.S.), pp. 2, 5–17, 26–28; Sitanath Biswas, *Jatitattva O Namasya Kulodarpan* (Dacca: 1931), pp. 68–71.

It was 'because of the illiteracy and the religious superstition, and all that', he argued, '[o]ur womenfolk would not be prepared to go to the polling booth.' Hence, 'for years to come', they were to be represented only by their men.[21] All these progressive movements, it therefore seems, were comfortably adjusted to the asymmetric gender relations that prevailed in Hindu society and instead of interrogating them, they helped perpetuate women's exclusion from their rights.

However, social mobility and the reform of gender codes contingent on that, also showed some apparently contradictory tendencies, mirroring in the same measure the dilemmas of *bhadralok* modernity in Bengal. In the nineteenth century, as the 'women's question' became a part of the discourse of progress, there was a movement for female education, representing a search for a new model of womanhood as imagined by the educated colonial males. This education did not however emancipate women from their subordinate existence in the quotidian *bhadralok* domestic life. The educated middle class males, it has been argued, dreamt of the Victorian ideal of companionate marriage; an educated *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) appeared to be the ideal companion of the enlightened Hindu *bhadralok.* This new model of Indian womanhood, being a fine blend of the self-sacrificing Hindu wife and the Victorian helpmate, further domesticated women as good wives and better mothers.[22] And if uneducated or ignorant women were regarded as impediments to progress or modernisation or bad for the family, children, community and nation, 'wrongly educated or over-educated' women, negligent of household chores, or more precisely Westernised independent women were considered to be threats to the cherished moral order of a modernised Hindu patriarchy.[23]

These dilemmas of *bhadralok* modernity and its apparently contradictory attitudes vis-à-vis gender have been discussed by a number of historians in recent years. What has not been pointed out however is that we can find a resonance of all these male anxieties and contradictions in the periodicals and other vernacular publications of the middle and lower castes and their associations. In other words, social mobility, lower caste movements and the print culture that they

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[21] Indian Statutory Commission, Oral Evidence—Bengal, Vol. II.

[22] For more details on this see M. Borthwisk, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (Princeton: 1984); G. Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation 1849–1905* (Rajshahi: 1983).

[23] Samita Sen, 'Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal', *Gender and History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1993, p. 234.

patronised, all worked towards the greater universalising of gender codes that were initially prevalent at the upper levels of Hindu caste society or were teleologically re-conceptualised by a higher caste/class elite responding to the pressures of colonial modernity. It is this process of extension of the cultural hegemony of a modernised Hindu patriarchy that this chapter seeks to explore.

III

Before entering the more complex terrain of the modernist debate on women and progress, let us quickly cover the Sanskritising tendencies among some of the socially mobile castes and their ontological implications for the status of women at the lower levels of Hindu society. It should be mentioned here, however, that Sanskritisation was not outside the process of modernisation, but rather a consequence of a convoluted colonial modernity, which on the one hand privileged individualism, hereditary property rights and social mobility, but on the other sanctified a Brahmanical view of culture with its interlocking system of symbols signifying status in ritual terms. It was therefore a process through which a symbolic structure of ranking laden with religious meanings adjusted itself to the new secular realities of distribution of power and wealth. In this symbolic world of Hindu society the moral codes that structured the position of women varied in each stratum of the hierarchy, but almost in every situation the burden of maintaining the 'honour' of the community and family rested on women and this obviously acted to their disadvantage. The notion that women among the lower caste groups enjoyed more freedom, or that gender relations among the *dalit–bahujan* was more 'democratic',[24] became true only in a relative sense as we approach the colonial period. In other words, as we will argue in this section, women in this stratum of society began to lose their autonomy as their communities—more precisely, a section of them—began to experience social mobility and felt pressured to reinvent their identity within the ideational and normative structures of the Brahmanical culture.

As far as the Bengal situation was concerned, Rajat Ray has reconstructed, from the novels of Tarasankar Banerjee, the emotional

[24] Kancha Ilaih uses the expression 'Dalit Patriarchal Democracy'. See his, 'Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative', in S. Amin and D. Chakrabarty (eds), *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings of South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: 1996), pp. 185–87.

world of the Kahar community, an untouchable agricultural labouring group, residing at the margins of the settled peasant habitats of western Bengal. Not burdened by the compulsions of maintaining bodily purity, the Kahar women were more forthright in expressing their physical passion, enjoyed more freedom in matters of marriage and divorce, extramarital affairs were permissible within limits, widow remarriage and '*sanga*' or second marriage between their men and women remained an accepted form of union even in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, Kahar women were sexually exploited by the high caste men of the village on a regular basis and their men held them responsible for such transgressions, rather than raising their fingers against their seducers. And if such sexual escapades were grudgingly approved of, any such relationship with men of unknown castes or outsiders was clearly a taboo. Thus when some Kahar women dared to escape to the railway junction town with outsiders and were later abandoned by their partners, their community refused to take them back.[25]

This situation reveals important aspects of the power–gender–caste relations within which the untouchable women found themselves locked. On the one hand, illicit sexual contact with an untouchable woman was not considered polluting for Brahman men, who in their own families strictly controlled female sexuality with a view to ensuring the purity of their progeny. The untouchable men, on the other hand, felt powerless against the Brahman gentry who sexually exploited their women. But they too had their own sense of honour and the burden of maintaining that community honour fell on the women who were obviously situated in a disadvantageous position within the power relations in their own community. Hence they were blamed for all acts of sin and shame, and when they were most vulnerable, being abandoned by their alien paramours, the community took its revenge by excommunicating them. Thus women at the bottom of the social structure suffered as well, just like their sisters at the top, only the forms of oppression varied. One could further argue that the untouchable women were doubly exploited—both as untouchables and as women.

The Kahars were an extremely marginal group, both socially and economically, and therefore, could hardly afford to emulate the stricter rules of feminine chastity or genteel behaviour of the Brahman gentry

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[25] Rajat K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (New Delhi: 2001), pp. 274–81.

or the Sadgop peasants around them. But the situation was entirely different for the other dalit groups who had been socially mobile in the nineteenth century and we can mention here two such cases: the Rajbansis who took advantage of the forest land reclamation in north Bengal, and the Namasudras who became pioneer cultivators reclaiming marshlands in the eastern districts. By the late nineteenth century both these castes had emerged as settled peasant communities, many of them enjoying considerable sub-infeudatory rights in the land.[26] And as they emerged as peasants, they began to emulate the stricter gender codes of the gentry, as the Sadgop peasants did in Birbhum district in the west, as depicted in the novels of Tarasankar Banerjee.

Previously among the Rajbansis there had been in existence various forms of tribal marriage, which defied stricter rules of patriarchal endogamy, and allowed women a considerable amount of freedom in choosing their life partners. Paying a 'bride-price' was the usual practice, but poor men had the option of paying with manual labour which they performed for the bride's family, instead of paying in cash. One particular form of marriage, known as *chotrudani*, even speaks of polyandry, allowing a married woman to marry again. Divorce was allowed and widow remarriage was freely permissible, and in some cases widows could choose their new partners and live together without going through any formal marriage procedure. But towards the early twentieth century, the Rajbansis attempted to discontinue all such practices, they adopted the more ritualised and structured forms of marriage; sought to restrain their women in monogamous relations; and introduced the purdah system as a mark of social respectability and for the purposes of claiming a genealogy of ritual purity. However, one should add the caveat here, that these changes were easier to enforce among the richer *jotdar* (landholding) Rajbansi families, than among the less prosperous sections who could hardly afford the luxury of women's seclusion or their abstention from productive labour. Therefore, even in the early twentieth century, a Rajbansi woman vending her wares in the weekly market or smoking in public was by no means a rare or abnormal sight.[27]

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[26] For social mobility of the Rajbansis, see Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement : The Rajbansis of North Bengal 1910–1947* (New Delhi: 2003); and for the Namasudras, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (Richmond, Surrey: 1997).

[27] See for more details, S. Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement*, pp. 42–43; also see Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs; Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-century Bengal* (New Delhi: 1999), pp. 160–61, 166–68.

Similarly, when the Namasudras lived an almost amphibious life in boats in the marshy tracts of Bakarganj and Faridpur, the very physical environment of their social existence subverted the stricter rules of sexual discipline, marriage and structures of kinship, and this was stereotyped by genteel society as amorous or sinful sexual habits. So when in the late nineteenth century, they emerged as a settled peasant community, they moved from their boats to homesteads, acquired land, started looking for status, felt the necessity of having legal heirs to inherit property, and invented a Brahmanical genealogy. First on their agenda of social reform was the streamlining of marriage rules and the family structure, thus establishing stricter control over female sexuality and reproductive power following the orthodox norms of Hindu society. Before their social reforms began, their women participated in agricultural production and visited markets to sell their merchandise. But a meeting of their community leaders in 1872 prohibited such practices, as the freedom of their women was considered to be a reason why the larger Hindu society held them in disrespect. In other words, as we have argued in the first chapter, in order to command respect from Hindu society, acceptance of its behavioural norms became mandatory, and this had the unfortunate result of curbing the relative autonomy that the Namasudra women had previously enjoyed.[28]

This imperative of emulating the orthodox Hindu gender codes was more keenly felt by the middle ranking peasant and trading castes, many of whom had experienced prosperity in the late nineteenth century and had entered the ranks of the *bhadralok*. All these upwardly mobile castes started their own exclusive caste associations in the early twentieth century and published their journals, which became conduits for the disseminating of ideas about various social reforms among the members of their respective communities.[29] As one looks at their publications, it is clearly apparent that the major social reform on their agenda was that which pertained to marriage rules. Endogamy in all such cases remained the preferred model of matrimonial relations as among the higher caste *bhadralok*, who could not dream of inter-caste marriage as a means of social integration and equality, even though some of them felt tortured by the

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[28] For more details on the Namasudra movement, see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, chapter 2.

[29] For more on social mobility and caste associations, see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, chapter 3.

'sufferings of the untouchables'.[30] Hypergamy by this time had certainly fallen into disrepute and affinal relationships and exchanges were ordered through further division of each endogamous group into a number of exogamous clans or *gotra*, and marriage had to take place across these boundaries.[31] If by the nineteenth century the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* stringently observed these rules sanctioned by textual authority, the upwardly mobile castes, seeking social status, also followed in their footsteps and regularised their marriage and adoption rules accordingly, preventing marriage within the same *gotra* and prohibiting divorce.[32]

As literary and autobiographical evidence of the period suggests, child marriage was the universal norm in high caste *bhadralok* families, where girls were married off by the age of 10 or 11.[33] In the late nineteenth century, as Ramkrishna Mukherjee's study shows, 63 per cent of the caste Hindus and 31 per cent of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal practiced child marriage as the preferred form of wedding arrangement for their daughters.[34] It is no wonder that the Age of Consent Bill of 1891, proposing to raise the age for the consummation of such marriages to 12 for girls, evoked such passionate resistance in Bengal.[35] The effect of the passage of this bill was similar to that of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, which we have examined in the previous chapter. However the census statistics of 1911 show that (see Table 4.1), while the educated upper caste *bhadralok* were gradually abandoning this practice, the socially mobile, ambitious lower castes had increasingly begun to adopt it at the turn of the century.

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[30] Gurudas Ray, *Asprisyer Marmabedana* (Calcutta: 1933), p. 5.

[31] For more on these marriage rules, see B. Chakraborti, *Samaj-sanskarak Raghunandan,* p. 118. The *gotra* or clan names derived from the names of the Vedic rishis, were prevalent among the Brahmans. The Kshatriyas and Vaisyas derived their *gotra* names from those of their ancestral priests. See for details, Inden, *Marriage and Rank*, p. 33. Eventually, the pure Sudras served by Brahmans in Bengal, also began to adopt *gotra* names in the same way. By the nineteenth century this practice seemed to have been more widely practiced.

[32] *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. V, Part I, p. 425.

[33] After all, *Smritikara* Raghunandan had prescribed the marriage of girls before the age of ten, the father of an unmarried girl reaching twelve incurring the sin of killing a Brahman. See Prasannamoyee Debi, '*Sekaler Katha*', in A. Sen and A. Bhattacharya (eds), *Sekele Katha: Satak Suchanay Meyeder Smritikatha* (Calcutta: 1997), p. 18; B. Chakraborti, *Samaj-sanskarak Raghunandan*, p. 120.

[34] Ramkrishna Mukherjee, *The Dynamics of Rural Society* (Berlin: 1957), p. 110.

[35] See for details, T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*.

Table 4.1

Castes	Percentage of married women and widows among the females of each caste in the age group of 5–12
Baidya	5.1
Kayastha	8.8
Subarnabanik	11.1
Brahman	16.0
Gandhabanik	16.3
Jalia Kaibartta	18.3
Namasudra	22.2
Kamar	23.3
Chasi Kaibartta (Mahishya)	25.9
Sundi or Saha	28.2
Sadgop	29.3
Tili and Teli	32.2
Goala	32.7
Pod	35.7

Source: *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part I, Table V, pp. 351–55.

Child marriage, however, began to decline as a popular form of marriage from the second decade of the twentieth century,[36] although the odd matrimonial advertisement for an infant bride could still be found in a caste journal.[37] But this decline was not so much because of any sympathy for the hapless child brides, as it was due to another significant change in the forms of marriage transaction among the upwardly mobile castes, the replacement of the 'bride-price' with dowry. As we have mentioned earlier, the prevalence of the custom of 'bride-price' was an indicator of cultural difference between the higher and the lower castes and this custom was therefore despised as degrading by conservative *smritikaras*, Raghunandan condemning it as sinful, virtually amounting to the selling of daughters.[38] Among the higher castes, on the other hand, the practice of dowry was prevalent from the later Vedic age, as the gift of a virgin and the gift of dowry were the two inseparable parts of their marriage rituals. To a large extent, as Lina Fruzzetti has argued, the economy of this marriage custom was related to the compulsions of child marriage.

[36] For statistical evidence, see *Census of India*, 1921, Vol. V, Part I, Subsidiary Table V, p. 283.
[37] *Tili Bandhab*, Baisakh 1320 B.S.
[38] B. Chakraborti, *Samaj-sanskarak Raghunandan*, p. 122.

Unmarried daughters remaining in the parental family beyond the prescribed age was inauspicious and brought infamy to the male line. The father of an unmarried girl was, therefore, willing to stake everything he had to get an appropriate groom from a respectable lineage. This obviously increased the demand for *pon* (dowry) as marriage alliances were always negotiated within a context of status and power—in addition to ritual purity—of the families involved.[39]

As the nineteenth century wore on, the respectable and well-to-do members of the peasant and trading castes, such as the Aguri, Sadgop, Mahishya, Tili and Gandhabanik, as well as some of the dalit families belonging to the Rajbansi and Namasudra castes, also began to imitate their betters by giving money to the father of the bride-groom.[40] Within the Hindu ideological framework, it was only through women and the birth of male children that a family could maintain the male line (*bangsha*). As the lower castes consciously accepted this construction of purity and lineage, the prevalence of 'bride-price' became an unwanted financial burden for families that were obliged to maintain the male line. Hence, an educated Mahishya noted in 1922, 'though both the practices of bride-price and dowry are equally evil, the custom of bride-price is causing more harm to the society than the system of dowry'.[41] This 'harm' was being conceptualised as much in a ritual sense, as it was in economic terms. The modernist economic logic would become more prominent in this discourse when a reformist movement began against the dowry system, as the demands in certain wealthy circles became oppressive. We shall return to that in a while, but we may mention here that the growing popularity of the custom of dowry had a contrary effect on the age of marriage for women. As the demand for *pon* increased, girls remained unmarried until a comparatively late age, and as this brought ritual infamy, as well as social disgrace to their parental families, some caste journals reported an increasing tendency of young females to suicide.[42]

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[39] See Lina Fruzzetti, *The Gift of a Virgin; Women, Marriage and Ritual in a Bengali Society* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: 1982), pp. 29–31, 38–40.

[40] *Census of India*, 1901, Vol. VI, Part I, pp. 251–55; *Mahishya Samaj,* Jaishtha, Ashadh, Karttik, Magh, Chaitra, 1321 B.S.; *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Chaitra-Baisakh 1332–33 B.S.; Jaishtha-Ashadh 1333 B.S.; *Gandhabanik*, Magh 1329 B.S.; Karttik 1330 B.S.; *Kshatriya*, Baisakh 1327 B.S.; Ashadh, Paush 1331 B.S.; Sraban 1333 B.S.; Sarat Chandra Biswas, *Sadgop Jati* (Chandernagore: 1328 B.S.), Third Part, pp. 47–62.

[41] *Mahishya Samaj,* Agrahayan 1329 B.S.

[42] *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha 1321 B.S.

We do not have much information on the financial transactions involved in such middle and lower caste marriages of this period. A short novel appearing in 1911 in the Mahishya women's journal, *Mahishya Mahila,* suggests that the amount of dowry could go up to Rs 1000 in cash, in addition to gold ornaments worth Rs 700.[43] The demand for an average middle class peasant family could be burdensome, considering the price levels of that period. Yet, the author takes satisfaction at the fact that 'had it been in a Kayastha or Brahman family, a higher amount of dowry would have to be paid.' Fortunately, she argues, the custom had not as yet become very oppressive among the Mahishyas.[44] The amount of dowry would of course depend on the economic status of the families. For the more prosperous Sadgop peasant families, as the matrimonial advertisements appearing in the *Sadgop Patrika* in the mid-1930s indicate, dowry offers from the parents of prospective brides could range from Rs 2000 to Rs 5000.[45] What is apparent from this literature is that it was a complex negotiating process that ultimately determined the amount which actually changed hands on the night of the wedding, and it took into account not just the secular status of the guardian of the bride, but also the ritual meanings of status—the respectability or purity of the brides male line as well as that of the prospective groom. But these complexities and variations aside, what becomes clear from this evidence is that by the second decade of the twentieth century this custom had become 'almost universally prevalent'.[46] When in the late 1960s Lina Fruzetti conducted her fieldwork in rural West Bengal, she concluded that: 'Bengali marriage (*biye*) consists of two major elements: the gift of a virgin (*sampradan*) and the payment of a dowry (*pon*).' She did not even consider the possibility that there could be castes that might not follow the second part of this marriage transaction at all; for in her fieldwork she found even a poor sweeper paying a token dowry of Rs 10 or less.[47]

The amount of dowry of course depended on the secular status of both the negotiating families, but to a significant extent it also hinged on the ritual meanings of their ranks and what further added

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[43] The national per capita income in 1911 was Rs 175.80 per annum as per 1946–47 prices. See, Dharma Kumar (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: 1982), p. 410.
[44] *Mahishya Mahila*, Agrahayan 1318 B.S.
[45] *Sadgop Patrika*, Agrahayan 1342 B.S.
[46] *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. V, Part I, p. 399.
[47] Fruzzetti, *The Gift of a Virgin*, pp. 9, 39.

to such bargaining positions was the concept of *kulinism*. It was another form of rank distinction within the caste system that significantly impinged on the status of women. In collective memory it is an institution associated with the mythological king Adisura, but historicity associates it with the twelfth century king Ballala Sen, himself a conservative *smritikara*, who was trying to bring back order to a society where the hierarchy had become confused through mixed marriages and indiscipline in the modes of Vedic worship. It was to confer higher grades on certain *kulas* among the Brahmans, and the Kayasthas who served them, on the basis of their purity as manifest in specific attributes (*guna*).[48] But this differentiation was later taken to be a privilege to abuse in order to claim a right to polygamy, taking advantage of the social preference of the relatively impure Brahmans for hypergamous marriage for their daughters. This created a huge demand for *kulin* men in the marriage market and the custom became a widespread social evil in the nineteenth century involving polygamy and oppressive dowry demands. As marriage became almost a profession for some *kulin* Brahmans, Vidyasagar had to launch a social crusade against it. An autobiographical note by Prasannamoyee Debi published in 1924 suggests that in the nineteenth century, marriage for daughters in high caste *kulin* families became a major problem for their guardians, as no *kulin* family would want to lose status, and be considered as *bhanga* or fallen, by giving their daughters in marriage to inferior Srotriya men. The same evidence, however, also suggests that the situation eased considerably in the early twentieth century.[49] But while the high castes began to abandon it, the custom was gradually introduced with all its ancillary taboos and status implications among some of the middle ranking castes of Bengal in the early twentieth century, such as the Aguris, a section of the Sadgops and Mayras.[50] The existing evidence does not suggest that it had degenerated to the same degree of perversion as among the Brahmans, leading to uninhibited polygamy, but it certainly had important implications for the amount and transactional modalities of dowry. The net result of this growing popularity of the dowry system and the associated notions of honour was to make a female child

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[48] See Inden, *Marriage and Rank*, pp. 37, 61; also K. Chakrabarti, *Religious Process*, pp. 119–21.

[49] Prasannomoyee Debi, *'Ghatak Agaman'*, in A. Sen and A. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Sekele Katha*, p. 20.

[50] *Modak Hitaishini*, Agrahayan, Paush 1336 B.S.; S. C. Biswas, *Sadgop Jati*, pp. 1–7.

unwelcome in a Hindu family, no matter what caste it belonged to. Although it did not lead to the same extreme cruelty of encouraging female infanticide, as in Punjab, for example,[51] Bengali Hindu society, across the caste lines, did not treat its women very fairly either.

This will become further evident as we look at how this society treated its widows. Since the ninth century the practice of *sati* had begun to grow in popularity in Bengal, which witnessed the revival of Brahmanism after a period of Buddhist hegemony, and it was then given textual sanction by the later *smritikaras* like Bhavadevabhatta, Sulopani, Govindananda, Gopal Nyaya Panchanan, Anantaram Vidyabagish etc. Yet there was no consensus about it, as Raghunandan in the sixteenth century, as we have noted already, did not prescribe it as an ideal even for the Brahman widows. Its growing popularity can be dated only from the late eighteenth century when some of the upwardly mobile Sudra families began to adopt it in order to legitimise their new social status.[52] According to one estimate, 45 per cent of the widows burnt in Bengal Proper in 1815–16 came from the lower social groups, especially the Sadgops, Tilis, Mahishyas, Goalas, Sahas, Aguris, including a dalit group—the Namasudras.[53] This remained a more or less constant trend, as another study shows that between 1815 and 1827, in more than 42 per cent of the *sati* cases the families involved belonged to castes other than the three traditional higher castes of the region. The most prominent among them were some peasant castes like the Sadgops, Aguris and Mahishyas, some trading castes like the Tilis, and some dalit groups like the Rajbansis and Namasudras. That the adoption of this practice was intimately connected with the process of social mobility is revealed in its association with affluence and status aspirations. According to this same study, about 65 per cent of the families where a case of *sati* had actually occurred during this period (1915–27) were either rich or had a reasonable income, and about 46 per cent belonged to the literate category.[54] These statistics, despite some possibility of a margin of error, unmistakably show the connection between the popularity of *sati* and the contradictions of a colonial modernity that on the one hand contributed to a greater diffusion of wealth across

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[51] See Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*, pp. 49–61.

[52] See for details, Benoy Bhushan Roy, *Socioeconomic Impact of Sati in Bengal and the Role of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: 1987), pp. 2, 27.

[53] Rajat K. Ray, 'Introduction', in V. C. Joshi (ed.), *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernisation in India* (New Delhi: 1975), p. 5.

[54] B. B. Roy, *Socioeconomic Impact of Sati*, pp. 62–63, 72–73.

caste lines, but on the other provided a significant autonomous space for an indigenous culture that sanctioned the reinvention of a long forgotten institution as a means of legitimising the new realities of social distribution of power and prestige.

The reformist campaign that resulted in the abolition of *sati* in 1829 further strengthened this Hindu teleological construction of widowhood. As Lata Mani has convincingly shown, the abolitionist as well as the anti-abolitionist campaign and also the official discourse debated over a scriptural interpretation of the issue. Widows remained a site rather than a subject of this debate, which was primarily to define Indian tradition.[55] Rammohun's reformist argument that ascetic widowhood rather than *sati* enjoyed a textual sanction made the task of the subsequent reformer Vidyasagar, trying to get widows remarried, doubly difficult. Despite the passage of the act in 1856 legalising widow remarriage, it increasingly became a universally forbidden practice among all the castes of Bengal. We have already discussed this reform movement and its results in the previous chapter. The ban on widow remarriage was gradually universalised across the ritual hierarchy, as even those castes that had previously practiced it, began to discontinue the practice in the second half of the nineteenth century.

If we break into the semiotics of these lower caste marriage reforms, what becomes clear is that these were attempts on the part of upwardly mobile lower caste males to take control of their private space and regulate the sexuality, fertility and labour of their women, who were now projected, following the norms of Hindu patriarchy, as the symbols of honour of their respective families and castes. They became the guardians of purity, the procreators of the male line and the symbols of the essence of a reconceptualised Hindu culture. In this new cultural construct men had no such burden. Thus, while the chastity of women within the family became an index of the status of the community, men could have sexual adventures with lower caste women and prostitutes with no implications of impurity or dishonour either for themselves, their families or their castes. In other words, in this code of honour a woman's chastity was non-negotiable, while a man's fidelity was normative, but not obligatory.[56] What we are attempting to underscore here is the point that such attitudes of

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[55] Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 1998).

[56] T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation,* p. 205.

higher caste male dominance now began to spread to others down below in the caste hierarchy. If social mobility was one positive impact of the introduction of colonial modernity in India, it also generated the contradictory tendency of universalising the ethos of Brahmanical patriarchy across Hindu society.

IV

It is comparatively easy to understand the Sanskritising behaviour of the upwardly mobile castes, as accepting the behavioural norms of the caste system was mandatory for moving up in its ranking scale. What is however more interesting and complex is the phenomenon of Westernisation. These sections of the middle and dalit castes, as they gained entrance to the charmed circle of the *bhadralok* or aspired to do so, also embraced colonial modernity, with all its associated dilemmas and contradictions. Partha Chatterjee has argued that within this modernist *bhadralok* discourse, the 'women's question' was resolved in the nineteenth century, as it was relegated to the private sphere. In the early decades of the twentieth century, when nationalism gained in momentum, we do not hear any more of women's issues in the public domain.[57] This position has been criticised in recent years, as empirical evidence does not substantiate the claim that women's issues no longer figured in public debates in the twentieth century. If in the dominant discourse of nationalism the 'women's question', like the 'caste question', was put on the backburner, it was because of the obvious privileging of the issue of national liberation. But it also needs to be mentioned here that the public space was multi-layered, and if at one level these issues were superseded, they dominated debates at other levels. Here we will revisit this question through a particular genre of 'low' level vernacular literature of this period—the journalistic literature that flourished among the middle and lower castes, which was written, read and financed by them, to show how women's issues dominated debates at this particular level of the Bengali print culture.

This is also important for demonstrating the complexities and the vertical reach of Indian modernity. Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the story of the transmigration of Western post-Enlightenment modernity to India was not one of 'transition', but of 'translation'; and

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[57] See Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: 1993).

he has emphasised the untranslatability of certain aspects of our culture that resisted modernisation and continued to exist as 'difference'. However, Chakrabarty reconstructs this 'difference' from what may be described as the 'high' literature of the Bengali Hindus. His illustration of difference is based on such examples as Tagore's spiritual imagination of the motherland or the educated *bhadraloks' adda*. For him some aspects of the *bhadralok* concepts of domesticity and womanhood stand as signifiers of difference that defied bourgeois modernity. The subalterns, he assumes, only resisted modernity and lived with their culture uncontaminated by western rationalism.[58]

If such assumptions dominate the discourse of post-colonial theorists, they are also shared by those who look at Indian modernity from a more liberal standpoint. Rajat Ray's recent book on the history of emotions and gender relations, reconstructed once again from the 'high' literature—the Bengali novels—accepts the teleology of a Bengal Renaissance, but also insists on the hybrid nature of this modernity, rooted firmly in and adapting to Indian culture. The Renaissance, he argues, started in the 1890s, exposing a small group of Indians to a whole range of new ideas from the West, and creating in the process a limited civil society, which debated various issues of public interest. This modernity gradually expanded itself and in the 1920s penetrated the countryside, thus preparing the grounds for an Indian awakening. Within this cultural milieu womanhood was reconceptualised. In the literature of this period, a woman is not merely considered a physical being, but is depicted as having a mind of her own. Yet her emotions are ultimately channeled into familiar terrain, as the man—woman relationship is still imagined within the traditional structures of arranged marriage, caste and patriarchy. However, Ray also assumes that unlike the Sadgop peasants who felt a greater compulsion to emulate the Brahman gentry, the untouchables, the Kahars in his case, remained unaffected by this modernity and were thus unrestrained by its contradictions and dilemmas.[59] This conclusion is not unexpected, as it emanates from a reading of the 'high' literature of the period, sharing the stereotype that the dalits remained untouched by modernity. This was certainly true in the cases of a few

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[58] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, Oxford: 2000). Significantly, this book, which is a major intervention in the debate on Indian modernity, does not at all take the caste question into consideration; see also his 'The Difference-Defferal of a Colonial Modernity' for a discussion on womanhood and modernity.

[59] R. K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History.*

extremely marginal groups, such as the Kahars of Ray or the Hadis, studied by Partha Chatterjee.[60] But this was hardly a generalised situation among all the dalits, as many of them, like the middle ranking trading and peasant castes, were also affected by colonial modernity and its epistemological contradictions. In other words, what we will try to show in this section is that modernity was both embraced and resisted at the lower levels of Hindu society as it was among the higher castes.

As Table 4.2 below indicates, one of the most important aspects of social development in Bengal in the early twentieth century was the spread of vernacular literacy, though not literacy in English, among some of the middle ranking trading castes, such as the Subarnabaniks and Gandhabaniks who outsmarted even the Kayasthas in this area. The peasant castes like the Sadgops and Mahishyas were

Table 4.2

	Percentage of literacy		Percentage of literacy in English	
Castes	1901	1911	1901	1911
Baidya	45.6	53.2	15.85	20.88
Brahman	35.8	39.9	8.9	10.90
Subarnabanik	32.3	45.1	15.14	21.87
Gandhabanik	31.8	31.4	10.18	5.86
Kayastha	30.9	34.7	7.59	9.80
Sundi or Saha	20.8	14.9	1.07	1.84
Teli or Tili	16.3	16.3	1.27	1.93
Sadgop	13.9	14	1.65	1.86
Mahishya	13	10.9	0.52	0.72
Barui	12.9	15.3	1.26	1.80
Jogi	10.4	13	0.26	0.51
Kalu	10.3	10.7	0.31	0.31
Napit	9.8	11	0.61	0.87
Pod	9.4	14.1	0.15	0.31
Goala	6.3	7.7	0.39	0.65
Jalia Kaibartta	4.3	4.4	0.08	0.21
Namasudra	3.3	4.9	0.04	0.22

Source: *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part I, Subsidiary Table VI, p. 373.

[60] See P. Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*.

not far behind, while even some of the dalit groups, like the Pods or Paundrakshatriyas, made spectacular progress in this direction. The Namasudras, one of the low achievers, had a literacy rate of about 5 per cent, when the provincial average was 7.7 per cent in 1911. This spread of vernacular literacy sustained the growth of a vernacular literature that may not have had high literary standards, but transmitted important messages for the upwardly mobile sections of the middle and lower castes and contributed towards the universalisation of the *bhadralok* culture and also its epistemological contradictions.

In the discourse of modernity, as we have mentioned already, the women's question got entangled with the issue of progress. The Indian reformers' early attempts to ameliorate the conditions of their women in response to colonialist critiques, ultimately ended in the projection of women as symbols of the essence of a reconceptualised Hindu culture and nation. Gandhi's intervention in the early twentieth century provided a new direction to this debate, as he wanted to involve women in the project of national liberation. But he did not offer a radical departure from the familiar gender discourse, prescribing a role for women within their own household. They could serve the nation, he argued, by spinning at home and by boycotting foreign goods. It was only at a later stage at the time of the Non-Co-operation Movement that he allowed a more active role for women in the nationalist movement. But if Gandhi was more sensitive to women's issues in his own way, the other male followers were less sure about it. So in the mainstream nationalist discourse, the question of women's welfare and upliftment was subordinated to and became contingent upon the liberation of the nation. The same debate was reproduced at another level, in the vernacular literature and journals of the lower and middle peasant and trading castes of the early twentieth century, the only difference that marked out this other discourse lay in its privileging, not displacement, of caste instead of nation. In other words, this literature reflected a growing concern that their caste movement, like national liberation, would not proceed if the status of their women did not improve.

The *Mahishya Samaj* indeed started with a concern for the nation. In 1922 it published an address delivered by Santosh Kumar Das at a Mahishya students' conference, which spoke eloquently about the 'unfreedom of women'. In the past we have treated women as women, and not as human beings, Das argued. So now by confining them to the home and compelling them to spin on the *charkha* (spinning wheel) we cannot achieve swaraj; even if we achieve it, it won't

last long. So before swaraj the country must perform the rites of penance.[61] Considering the time of publication, this position was quite radical; it even contained a mild indictment of Gandhi. But almost simultaneously the *Mahishya Samaj* also reflected a shift from nation to caste: 'The progress of a caste is impossible without the progress of its women', noted another article in the previous issue of the journal in 1922.[62] Such pronouncements, it seems, came directly from a reference to the Western civilisational model of progress. 'If we look at the social history of any nation that has attained greatness in this world', noted *Tili Bandhab*, 'we will find the active contribution of women.' So 'for any social development', noted the *Subarnabanik Samachar*, 'it is not enough to look at the men alone; along with them, women should also receive proper attention.'[63] It was from this epistemological position—the progress of the community depending on the welfare of its women—that these journals approached the question of women's uplift and discussed such issues as child marriage, dowry, widow remarriage and above all female education. The debate over widow remarriage we have already discussed in the previous chapter; here we shall look at the other debates.

As the Hindu nationalist opposition to the Age of Consent Bill of 1891 gradually subsided, the custom of child marriage began to lose its emotional sensitivity. There was now a growing but less visible campaign to discontinue the practice as it was thought to be contributing to another concern of the Hindu nationalists: the alleged demographic decline of the Hindus. A number of intermediate and lower castes also embraced the argument and sought to discontinue the practice. The Mahishyas launched a campaign against it,[64] the Gandhabaniks too sought to build up opinion to 'discourage' child marriage.[65] Among the Subarnabaniks the rate of child marriages was already low (see Table 4.1); however, they still passed a resolution condemning the practice at their third annual conference held at Calcutta in 1927.[66] Such condemnation also appeared regularly in the caste journals of the Tilis, Sadgops, Baruis, Jogis and the

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[61] Santosh Kumar Das, *'Abhyarthana samitir sabhapatir abhibhashan, Bangiyo Mahishya Chhatra Sammilani', Mahishya Samaj*, Ashwin 1329 B.S.
[62] *Mahishya Samaj*, Bhadra 1329 B.S.
[63] Quoted in Chandrima Sinha, *'Mahishya jatir samajik andolan o Mahishya nari', Aitihasik,* vol. 3, no. 2, April–June 1981, p. 58.
[64] *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha 1319 B.S.
[65] *Gandhabanik,* Agrahayan 1330 B.S.
[66] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1334 B.S.

Rajbansis.[67] The Namasudras began to speak about the evils of this practice and in their annual conference in Jessore in 1908 they resolved that 'any Namasudra marrying his son under 20 or daughter under 10 will be excommunicated.'[68]

There is no reason to believe however that this critique of child marriage originated from any anxiety over the health of the infant brides facing the prospect of consummation of their marriages at the tender age of 10 or 12. What was really a matter of concern was how to properly use their reproductive power in the interest of the community. The *Mahishya Samaj* placed the issue of child marriage directly within the Hindu eugenicist debate of the early twentieth century. The demographic decline of the Bengali Hindus, and of the Mahishyas in particular, was related to this custom. The health of the progeny of such marriages and ultimately the welfare of the community were being threatened, an article contended in 1912, by physically immature mothers giving birth to sick children and contributing to a higher rate of infant mortality.[69] Others were uncomfortable as young housewives were found to be incapable of looking after their households properly. Some feared that child marriage would inflate the number of widows, creating more problems for the family.[70] And for those fathers with numerous female offspring, one way of immediate escape from the oppressive demands of dowry and the prospect of humiliation was to defer the marriages of infant daughters.[71] In other words, the reform issue was approached entirely from the perspective of the welfare and progress of the family and community; the mental and physical well-being of the infant girls rarely figuring in this discourse. It is interesting to note that not a single article appearing in these journals referred to the violence involved in child marriage and its early consummation. The tears of Phulmonee Dasee,[72]

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[67] *Jogisakha*, Baisakh, Jaishtha, Ashadh, Sraban 1312 B.S.; Paush 1315 B.S.; Agrahayan 1327 B.S.; Bhadra, Paush 1330 B.S.; *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Chaitra–Baisakh 1332–33 B.S.; Magh–Falgun 1333 B.S.; *Kshatriya*, Chaitra 1332 B.S.; *Sadgop Patrika*, Sraban, Baisakh 1330 B.S.; Paush 1337 B.S.; *Tilir Gaurab*, Ashwin 1326 B.S.; *Bangiyo Vaisya Barujibi Sabhar Chaturdas Barshik Karyabibaran* (Jessore: 1915), p. 55.

[68] L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers, Jessore* (Calcutta: 1912), p. 50.

[69] Ramkrishna Mandal, '*Balyabibaha*', *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha 1319 B.S.

[70] C. Sinha, '*Mahishya jatir samajik andolan…*', p. 72.

[71] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Ashadh 1324 B.S.

[72] Phulmonee Dasee was a 10 year-old girl killed in a marital rape in 1890 by her husband 29 years older than her. See T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p. 210 and passim.

seem to have been forgotten in Bengal after a lapse of 20 years. And then there were still many who resisted this modernist reform agenda informed by a colonial rationalist knowledge. The 1923 annual conference of the Bangiya Subarnabanik Sammilani proposed a resolution recommending 19 years as the minimum age of marriage for boys and 11 years for girls. An amendment proposing to raise the age for girls to 13 was hotly debated and was in the end rejected.[73] The 1927 resolution mentioned earlier had sought to project unanimity on this issue, and it carefully avoided any reference to the specificities of age. There were, in other words, still many people within the Subarnabanik *samaj* who did not as yet share the new modernist reform mentality and remained anchored in the Sanskritising mode.

The issue of dowry was related more directly to the financial welfare of the family, associated with the more modernist notions of honour and status. As the demands became increasingly oppressive in the early twentieth century, many of the Mahishyas, Tilis, Sahas, Sadgops, Yadavas, Mayras and Rajbansis became vocal against the system.[74] The Mahishyas appealed to their caste members to refrain from practicing what they considered to be a modern distortion of the ancient marriage customs. Instead of wealth, 'the beauty and qualities' of the girl, they thought, should be the main criteria for selecting brides. Instructions were sent to all the local committees of the caste association to publicise the issue and work for the eradication of this social evil. Elaborate reports of marriages that did not involve any payments began to appear in the journal, which also proposed to publish names and addresses of parents who were prepared to marry their sons without any demand for dowry.[75] The Gandhabaniks in their first conference at Calcutta in 1923 passed a resolution condemning the practice.[76] The Tilis also condemned

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[73] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1330 B.S.

[74] *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha, Ashadh, chaitra 1321 B.S.; *Modak Hitaishini*, Karttik, Agrahayan 1336 B.S.; *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Chaitra–Baisakh 1332–33 B.S.; Jaishtha–Ashadh 1333 B.S.; *Kshatriya*, Baisakh 1327 B.S.; Ashadh, Paush 1331 B.S.; Sraban 1332 B.S.; *Jogisakha*, Jaistha 1328 B.S.; *Gandhabanik*, Karttik, Magh 1330 B.S.; *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1327 B.S.; *Bangiya Vaisya Barujibi Sabhar chaturdas Barshik Karya-bibaran*, p. 55; *Purbabanga Vaishya samitir Ashtam Barshiya Karya-bibarani* (Calcutta: 1917), p. 4; Sarat Chandra Biswas, *Sadgop Jati*, pp. 47–62; Nabin Chandra Ghosh, *Gopjatir Kshatriyatva* (Mymensingh: 1331 B.S.), p. 60.

[75] *Mahishya Samaj*, Falgun 1319 B.S.; Jaishtha 1322 B.S.

[76] *Gandhabanik*, Magh 1330 B.S.

the growing practice of educated young men being sold in the marriage market at high prices. Their journal gave publicity to such laudable examples of a wealthy zamindar's son being married to the daughter of a less prosperous family without any demand for dowry and asked other parents to follow such examples in order to make their community respectable in society.[77] The indices of respectability thus seemed to have changed in this more modernist discourse of reform, to the extent that a particular section of the Tilis even thought of applying social coercion. The rules of the Panch Parganastha Tili Samaj proposed that no one would be able to demand or pay more than Rs 500 by way of dowry. If the rule was violated, an amount equal to the excess claim would have to be paid to a collective fund of the caste or else the erring parties would be excommunicated.[78] This was indeed a radical step, but the Tilis were no exception. One of the rules in the constitution of the Sadgop association also required its members to curtail expenditure on marriage and donate a portion of it to a collective community fund.[79] However, we do not have any information as to how such measures were actually applied in real situations.

In this particular area of social reform the most active were the Subarnabaniks. In 1878 they had formed the Saptagramiya Subarnabanik Hitaishini Sabha with the wealthy and influential Rajendralal Mullick as its President. Its sole aim was to eliminate the dowry system from the community, and in its first meeting 1064 people signed a pledge to refrain from paying or demanding dowry at the time of their children's marriages. Subsequently, the Bengal Subarnabanik Sammilani was formed in 1916 and at its first annual conference in Calcutta the dowry system remained one of the major issues of debate and of its reform agenda.[80] At its second conference in Jessore a resolution was passed recommending that a list of all marriages in the community not involving any payment of dowry be placed every year in their annual conferences.[81] Hereafter, almost every issue of their caste journal *Subarnabanik Samachar* carried stories of such marriages not involving any financial transaction and published matrimonial advertisements that did not contain any

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[77] *Tili Samachar*, Baisakh–Ashadh 1326 B.S.; *Tili Bandhab*, Ashadh 1326 B.S.
[78] *Tili Bandhab*, Sraban 1326 B.S.
[79] *Sadgop Sabhar Niyamabali* (Chandernagore: 1327 B.S.), p. 7.
[80] Narendranath Laha, *Subarnabanik Katha O Kirti*, Vol. VII (Calcutta: 1941), pp. 150–53.
[81] *Subarnabanik Samachar,* Magh 1323 B.S.

reference to dowry.[82] In 1925 a more enthusiastic group in Nadia formed the Nadia Subarnabanik Bibaha-samasya Samadhan Samity [Nadia Subarnabanik Marriage Problem-solving Association], the purpose of which was to mediate between the parents of brides and grooms and negotiate marriages, preferably with no dowry demand or with only minimum payments, if at all.[83] Yet despite all these endeavours, the movement made little progress. In 1917 one author lamented in *Subarnabanik Samachar* that although one or two stories of ideal marriage arrangements were appearing in the journal, the movement on the whole was progressing at such a slow pace that there was widespread apprehension that before long it might disappear altogether.[84] Seven years later another article on dowry reported how it had reached crisis proportions, as extortion of money from the parents of the bride both before and after marriage had become a regular occurrence in the Subarnabanik community. Indeed, this had become an incentive for many people to abandon their present wives on the slightest pretext and enter into a new marriage.[85]

These champions of the anti-dowry campaign found the practice objectionable for various reasons. Some associated it with the vices of modernity. Their argument being that, in ancient times no material exchange was involved in marriage contracts, and, hence, dowry appeared to be a modern distortion that needed rectification.[86] Such distortions were attributed to the greed for material wealth or a material culture that was considered to be the effect of contact with Western civilisation, more particularly with Western education. Since the guardians invested a good deal of money in the education of their sons, they now expected a good return. The financial burden of education was thus ultimately shifted to the parents of the brides, compelling their 'fathers and brothers' to go to the moneylenders, mortgage their lands and properties and thus ruin their family financially.[87] For the trading castes like the Subarnabaniks, the dowry system had turned marriage into an 'inferior type of business', where beauty (or the lack of it) was traded for wealth.[88] But apart from such

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[82] See for example, *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Falgun 1323 B.S.; Chaitra 1330 B.S.; Baisakh Ashadh, Sraban 1331 B.S.
[83] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Baisakh 1332 B.S.
[84] Krishnadas Mullick, *'Ponpratha'*, *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Ashadh 1324 B.S.
[85] Gaurhari Dey, *'Pon'*, *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Ashadh 1331 B.S.
[86] *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha 1322 B.S.
[87] *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha 1322 B.S.; Agrahayan 1329 B.S.
[88] '*Ponprathar khed*', *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Bhadra 1324 B.S.

moral objections, for trading families with unmarried daughters it involved a huge wasteful expenditure, adversely affecting the flow of cash for their business. Hence they began to advocate its abolition, as did the Marwari traders in Calcutta around the same time.[89] Some also talked about the violation of religious ethics. The *shastras* had required men to protect their women; but in violation of that religious code men had become instrumental in the death of numerous women. The custom was therefore irreligious and needed to be discontinued.[90]

The debate over dowry, like that of child marriage, was thus being approached from a perspective that privileged the material interests of the community and the status of the family over the issue of the honour of its women. No one in this debate ever mentioned that the practice was making the birth of a female child unwelcome in an average Hindu family. An editorial in *Sadgop Patrika* in 1935, by which time the dowry system had become an almost universal practice, pointed its finger at another dimension of this social problem, indicating significant changes in the concept of status in a modernising society. It blamed the parents of marriageable women, rather than the fathers of prospective grooms, for the growing popularity of this practice. As status aspirations compelled them to look for educated, wealthy, urban grooms, the latter's market value continually increased. As a remedy, it suggested that the parents of prospective brides look for less accomplished grooms, who were endowed with greater human qualities.[91] Indeed, an analysis of the matrimonial advertisements that appeared in the *Sadgop Patrika* around this time reveals that most of the urban educated grooms asked for no dowry, but looked for 'healthy, beautiful, educated bride[s]', while on the other hand, parents of prospective brides, coming primarily from a rural, peasant background, offered dowries ranging from Rs 2000 to Rs 5000[92] to entice educated professional grooms for their daughters. One advertisement offered 'dowry according to the qualities of the groom', thus leaving adequate space to bargain for status.[93]

The campaign for the abolition of dowry did not imply any restriction on the acceptance of what was conveniently being described as 'voluntary' dowry. In 1917 the *Subarnabanik Samachar* approvingly

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[89] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Agrahayan 1330 B.S.
[90] *Subarnabanik Samachar,* Magh 1323 B.S.
[91] *Sadgop Patrika*, Magh 1342 B.S.
[92] The per capita income in 1921 was Rs 173.40 per annum at 1946–47 prices. See D. Kumar, *The Cambridge Economic History of India*.
[93] *Sadgop Patrika,* Agrahayan, Magh, Falgun 1342 B.S.

reported three 'new type[s]' of marriage contracted in Bikrampur Pargana in east Bengal, where the fathers of the brides 'voluntarily' agreed to pay a fixed amount of money for the future education of their son-in-laws.[94] Another article in the same journal reminded its readers that the abolition of dowry did not mean that the father of a groom could not accept any gift from the guardians of his daughter-in-law, if it was given voluntarily, without the pressure of a contractual arrangement.[95] And finally, like child marriage, there was not as yet consensus in any of these communities on the issue. In 1923 at a conference of the Chinsurah Subarnabanik Samiti a straightforward resolution asking its members to refrain from demanding dowry and to boycott those marriage ceremonies that involved such payments had to be ultimately amended after a heated debate. The new more benign resolution merely suggested that no sympathy should be expressed towards such marriages and the members were to curtail expenditure on lights and music in wedding ceremonies.[96]

It also needs to be mentioned here that among the peasant castes like the Sadgops and the Mahishyas, the dowry system became relatively more widespread only among the more wealthy and educated sections of these castes. Their journals were reporting as late as in the 1920s and 1930s that the custom of 'bride-price' still survived among the 'unenlightened' sections of their communities.[97] The relative silence on the issue dowry reform in the dalit literature also tells about its less extensive practice among these groups. But a notable exception here were the Rajbansis and their journal *Kshatriya,*[98] and this unmistakably associated the popularity of this custom with the extent of social mobility.

V

The most contentious issue in the realm of gender reform was female education, which came to be privileged in the nineteenth century, as the 'women's question' became a part of a discourse of social progress. Important personalities and institutions like Radhakanta Deb, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshub Chandra Sen, the School Book

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[94] *Subarnabanik Patrika*, Jaishtha 1324 B.S.
[95] K. Mullick, *'Ponpratha'*.
[96] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1330 B.S.
[97] *Mahishya Samaj*, Agrahayan 1329 B.S.; *Sadgop Patrika*, Chaitra 1342 B.S.
[98] See *Kshatriya*, Baisakh 1327 B.S.; Ashadh, Paush 1331 B.S.; Sraban 1333 B.S.

Society and the Brahmo Samaj became involved in this campaign, which by the beginning of the twentieth century also began to incorporate the organisations of various lower and middle ranking castes. Among them the more urbanised and resourceful trading castes like the Subarnabaniks took major initiatives in this direction. Wealthy and influential members of the community donated money to run free schools for women.[99] In December 1925 they organised a women's conference, the 'Subarnabanik Mahila Sammilani', where about 500 women congregated to discuss, under the guidance of some of the male leaders of the community, the ways and means of eradicating female illiteracy.[100] Their journal *Subarnabanik Samachar* continued to publish on a regular basis articles on the issue of female education. The Gandhabaniks too passed a resolution in favour of female education in their first *Mahasammilani* or annual general meeting, in December 1923,[101] as did the Sahas of eastern Bengal in their first annual conference at Dhaka in the same year.[102] A peasant caste like the Mahishyas were enthusiastic as well, as their journal began to urge their literate women to educate their female neighbours and thus to spread literacy among the womenfolk of their community.[103] Again it was this community that first decided to bring out a women's journal, the *Mahishya Mahila,* which began to appear from 1911 under the editorship of an erudite Mahishya woman, Krishnabhabini Biswas. The immediate success of the journal, certainly the first and only one of its kind, is indicated by its circulation figures of about 1000 per month in 1911. The fact that even a larger number of women read it,[104]

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[99] In 1917 Kanailal Dhar, a wealthy Subarnabanik trader from Ahiritola in Calcutta donated money to run a local girls school where about 150 girls received free education. It was then restructured on the model of the Mahakali Pathshala, a nationalist project for the education and moral training of the Bengali women. The school, which eventually came to be known as the 'Kanailal Dhar Abaitanik Hindu Balika Vidyalaya' (Kanailal Dhar Free Hindu Girls' School), continued to be financed by his son and the *Subarnabanik Samachar* encouraged others to follow his example. See *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Bhadra, Aswin 1324 B.S.; Agrahayan 1330 B.S.

[100] *Subarnabanik Samachar,* Kartik 1324 B.S.; Paush 1333 B.S.

[101] *Gandhabanik,* Magh 1330 B.S.

[102] Makhanlal Deshmukh, *Swajati Hitasadhan Samiti, Dacca, Karyabibarani, Pratham Barsha 1330 B.S.* (Dacca: 1331 B.S.), p. 25.

[103] *Mahishya Mahila*, Jaishtha 1319 B.S.

[104] 'Annual Report on Indian Papers in the Bengal Presidency for 1911', Govt. of Bengal, Home (Confidential) File No. 96(1–5) of 1912, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, also C. Sinha, '*Mahishya jatir samajik andolan…',* pp. 60–61.

suggests the success of the literacy campaign among the Mahishya women. The example was followed by other peasant castes as well. The *Sadgop Patrika* planned special 'women's issues' and encouraged its female readers to write for the journal.[105] Even dalit castes like the Namasudras welcomed Christian Missionary efforts to educate their women.[106] Their success was less spectacular, but not totally invisible; on 12 June 1938 a leading Calcutta daily reported that three Namasudra girls had passed the Matriculation examination.[107]

But female education also remained a hotly contested terrain of social reform. On the one hand, it became almost a compulsion for an educated elite responding to the reformist discourse of progress and modernity. But on the other hand, it had the potential to threaten harmony in family relations and the peace of the household, which remained the only space of autonomy or the last refuge for an embattled and humiliated Hindu masculinity. These dilemmas and anxieties of a 'revivalist–nationalist' discourse of the late nineteenth century[108] resonated again in the lower caste literature in the early twentieth century. For the educated males of these castes, hoping for companionate marriage modeled after a Victorian ideal, female education was hardly an issue that could be avoided. *'Stri-siksha purusher sukher kalpabriksha'* (women's education is the source of all male happiness), wrote an article in *Subarnabanik Samachar* in 1924, for it would generate proper qualities of a true partner in an enlightened household. It would strengthen the family, and strong families would make a strong community.[109] Education, as another article preached, trained women to become *sahadharmini* in the true sense of the term, that is, to become faithful partners in the material work and spiritual duties of their husbands—in other words a helpful companion.[110] Such constructions were no doubt derived from the discourse of western modernity. The West had already acknowledged the victory of women, as another article in the same journal argued; those waves of change had already crossed the Himalayas and were

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[105] *Sadgop Patrika*, Agrahayan 1342 B.S.
[106] C. S. Mead, *The Namasudras and Other Addresses* (Adelaide: 1911), pp. 9, 11, 14, 17, 22, 63.
[107] *Hindustan Standard*, 12 June 1938.
[108] For more on this discourse, see T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*.
[109] Pramathanath Mullick, *'Stree-sikshar prayojaniyata'*, *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Bhadra 1331 B.S.
[110] Narendranath Mullick, *'Banganarir samajik abastha'*, *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Baisakh 1332 B.S.

about to flood the plains. 'For our own good, we must not resist this wave of change.'[111] For in this world, noted a similar article in the *Tili Bandhab*, the nations who progressed were those who had both educated men and women.[112] Female education thus became a pre-condition for the progress of the community, as women were the protectors and nurturers of its lineage, honour and respect.[113] However, this did not mean that through education women would be conferred selfhood. In 1935 a woman—a housewife—belonging to the Sadgop caste passed the Entrance examination of the University of Calcutta. *Sadgop Patrika* reported the news in the following words:

> We have received the information that the wife of Mr Nitaichand Haldar, a resident of Barrackpore in the 24-Parganas, who is also the daughter of Hiralal Ghosh of Entally in Calcutta, has passed the last Entrance examination of the University of Calcutta.... We congratulate her and we express our sincere wish that she makes further progress in education.[114]

It is interesting to note that nowhere in the news report do we find the name of the woman who actually passed the examination and therefore could rightfully claim credit for this extraordinary achievement, which both her family and community took pride in. Instead, her identity remained located in her family and could be indicated sufficiently through the names of her husband and father. In other words, her education is for the progress of her family and community, not for her own selfhood, and it does not liberate her, but only binds her further to a re-conceptualised domesticity. As *Tili Bandhab* had noted in 1915, an educated wife meant better training for the children, efficient management of the household and a happier family capable of contributing to the material and spiritual well-being of the community.[115] However, of all these domestic roles, the most privileged was motherhood, as a woman's most important responsibility, wrote another article in the same journal, was the nurturing of male progeny. The mental development of the sons depended on the level of education of their mother.[116] This emphasis on motherhood and

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[111] Nandalal Mukhopadhyay, *'Hindu samaje narir sthan'*, *Subarnabanik Samachar,* Baisakh 1329 B.S.
[112] Narendranath De, *'Duti katha'*, *Tili Bandhab*, Jaishtha 1326 B.S.
[113] P. Mullick, *'Stree-sikshar prayojaniyata'*.
[114] *Sadgop Patrika*, Agrahayan 1342 B.S.
[115] *Tili Bandhab*, Agrahayan, 1322 B.S.
[116] N. De, *'Duti katha'*.

its association with the progress of the community came obviously from a reference to the Western model of civilisation. 'There is a proverb among the Englishmen', an author mentions in the *Subarnabanik Samachar* in 1924, 'that son's education starts thirty years before his birth,'[117] that is, with the beginning of his mother's education. Our present campaign for female education will be successful, argued another Subarnabanik advocate of the reform, if it can make of our women ideal mothers in their 'knowledge, affection and action'.[118] 'An educated mother is worth more than a hundred teachers', argued a contributor in *Mahishya Mahila*. So without female education no caste or community or nation could ever make any progress.[119]

However, this discourse of progress of the community could not conceal male anxiety over female insubordination within the family and this provoked a lot of resistance to the reform agenda. One Dhanapatinath Das expressed his apprehension most candidly on the pages of *Mahishya Samaj*: 'If after receiving higher education women start protesting against men's every action, it will lead to a great social calamity.' Similar education for men and women, he therefore argued, would lead to an unmitigated social calamity. He preferred instead only some ethical and moral training for women so that they could live up to the ideal of Aryan womanhood.[120] We also come across in this context some resistance to the Western modernist wisdom and a forceful argument that Western models were not always applicable to Indian realities. But this assertion of difference came in the guise of an unabashed defence of gender inequity. 'In the West', as another article argued, 'women were free' and therefore formal education through schools and colleges could be beneficial to them. 'But in India women were never free' and so the same type of education would hardly yield the same results for them. Previously, they accepted their ordained role in the family, performed their duties without caring for their own pleasure and surrendered all their hopes at the feet of God and their husbands. But of late, they had developed a sense of 'liberation', and this was the baneful effect of their being infected by the 'breeze of higher education'.[121] Some people mistook 'Liberty' for 'License', wrote Dhirendra Kumar Laha in an article named

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[117] P. Mullick, *'Stree-sikshar prayojaniyata'*.
[118] N. Mullick, *'Banganarir samajik abastha'*.
[119] *Mahishya Mahila*, Jaishtha–Ashadh 1319 B.S.
[120] Dhanapatinath Das, *'Kartabyer pathe-2'*, *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha 1328 B.S.
[121] *Mahishya Samaj*, Falgun 1323 B.S.

'*Streesiksha*' (female education) published in *Subarnabanik Samachar* in 1925, using the two English words to describe a situation that challenged his repertoire of Bengali expressions. As he further wrote:

> We do not want our women to develop themselves on Western model through college education … we do not want our women to give up domestic duties and become *vivacious* [the English word used in the original] … or to dress brazenly and to while away their time in reading plays and novels.… We want that female education which has traditionally respected their motherhood as well as womanhood.[122]

This statement quoted above reveals another colonial masculinist anxiety about higher education making their women lazy and neglectful of household chores and thus withdrawing their labour, which alone made the family unit function smoothly within a modern context. This stereotype of educated but slothful, 'inactive and talkative', 'novel reading' women features prominently in the lower caste literature of the early twentieth century.[123] This obviously mimics a nineteenth century moralist, Hindu upper caste fear of the depraving influence of the huge crop of vulgar literature produced at the Battala presses in north Calcutta—the farces and novels that dealt with themes and stories that bordered on the 'sensational' and 'sensuous' and even on 'titillating' and 'scandalous'. This 'low' literature, representing according to one scholar a 'counter culture' to the high moral order of the *bhadralok*, found its way into lower middle class homes and the women were supposedly its most avid consumers, resulting in a moralist panic.[124] However, there is no reason to suppose that it was only the 'low' literature that was creating this fear, and that the 'high' literature of the 'Bengal Renaissance' was welcome in these households for the purpose of female enlightenment. This caste literature also very clearly reveals alarm caused by the subversive implications of the modernist cultural 'awakening' for the patriarchal structure of the Hindu family. Rajat Ray has argued that the Bengali novels that developed in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, as a significant literary product of the 'Bengal

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[122] Dhirendra Kumar Laha, *'Streesiksha', Subarnabanik Samachar*, Agrahayan 1332 B.S.

[123] *Ibid.*; also see *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1331 B.S.; *Mahishya Mahila*, Jaishtha–Ashadh 1322 B.S.; cited in C. Sinha, '*Mahishya jatir samajik andolan …'*, p. 68.

[124] See for details, Anindita Ghosh, 'Revisiting the "Bengal Renaissance"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 October 2002.

Renaissance', represented both a re-conceptualisation of Indian womanhood and a new imagination about the value of love. Here women were considered as endowed with both a mind and an individual self, and premarital courtship and extramarital love were construed as distinct possibilities, though not always capable of being consummated within the constricted space of arranged marriage, caste disabilities and patriarchy. Despite such compromises however, Ray argues, there was a greater acceptance of these ideational constructs of the man–woman relationship, and after the 1920s their influence began to percolate downwards from the elite circles to Indian village society.[125] This lower caste literature with its stiff opposition to higher education for women and this not too concealed disapproval of novel-reading, which could plant wrong and subversive ideas in the heads of gullible women, would certainly problematise this claim of the uncontested vertical reach of Indian modernity.

This resistance to higher education for women at one stage became quite frantic, taking recourse to a biological argument as a last resort and connecting it with the pleasures of conjugality. Biologically men and women are differently constituted and the social environment makes that difference more pronounced. So the curriculum developed by the University of Calcutta primarily to educate men, as a letter to the editor in *Subarnabanik Samachar* argued in 1921, cannot suit the intellectual capabilities and physical constitution of women. Therefore, in order to save their health from the exertions of a modern examination system, a new kind of curriculum needed to be devised.[126] Interestingly, an editorial in *Mahishya Mahila*—the women's journal—took this biological argument to a bizarre extreme, connecting it to the pleasures and claims of conjugality. It did not reject the reformist agenda, but twisted the modernist argument by asserting that 'lack of formal education does not make a person ignorant'; on the contrary, it was positively harmful for women, whose 'main purpose of life' was reproduction and the rearing of children. And it elaborates on this position in the following words:

> After receiving education like men, women are forgetting their skills of doing household chores, cooking, child rearing and other domestic arts.... Excessive reading, thinking and hard work have resulted in the flattening of their big breasts, hardening of their hearts and lessening of their child-bearing capacity.[127]

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[125] See R. K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History*.
[126] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Falgun 1328 B.S.
[127] *'Streesiksha', Mahishya Mahila*, Jaishtha–Ashadh 1322 B.S.

In other words, education was affecting their sexuality, emotions, as well as biological functions! In view of such stiff resistance, even the most liberal champions of this reform had to seek a fine balance between female education, constituted gender roles and the demands of conjugality. A female character in a short play that appeared in *Sadgop Patrika* in 1936 thus defends her reformist position as a delicate balancing act:

> **Bharati**: Listen Kanakdi, we have been educated, if necessary we can look for a job, but that does not mean we have become men.... We also sleep with our husbands, bear children, cook and serve daily meals. We do not ride on the back of our husbands and roam around, or do not whip them like horses if we have a quarrel.... Nor do we desert our husbands and drive our cars around to look for another. But Anudi, we want to tell our men that we are human beings too and should not be neglected or disrespected.[128]

What is being consciously negated here is the image of the liberated Western woman—leaving her husband, riding horses and driving cars—with emphasis being shifted to the humanistic aspects of this social reform. But in spite of such reassuring pleas, the lower caste journals recorded numerous strong voices of disapproval to higher university education for women. 'The women do not need that much education, as do the men', wrote an educated Mahishya in 1918. So what should be the content of their education? Like most of such educated men, he did not think that female education needed to go beyond the domestic sciences. And then, they might also be given some 'rudimentary knowledge' in art and literature, so that their erudite husbands could have the pleasure of having some intelligent conversation.[129] An article in *Tili Bandhab* was more specific in prescribing a curriculum, with statements of objectives and their rationale. Women should have a little knowledge of literature, so that they could read and comprehend the epics and books on local history. They must learn a little mathematics, so that they could maintain the day-to-day family accounts, and they should also receive some elementary lessons in hygiene and healthcare, so that they could nurse their ailing children and other members of the family.[130] Even

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[128] Sreeshchandra Kumar, *'Charurbarga'*, *Sadgop Patrika*, Jaishtha–Ashadh 1343 B.S.
[129] *Mahishya Samaj*, Agrahayan 1325 B.S.
[130] *Tili Bandhab*, Agrahayan 1322 B.S.

the Subarnabaniks, who were the most active in this particular reformist terrain, recommended in their second annual conference in 1916 that female education not go beyond training in domestic duties and handicrafts.[131] Over the years they shifted ground a little, as the tenth annual conference in 1924 recommended elementary education for their women, in addition to some moral and religious training, some instruction in health and hygiene, cooking and other household skills. Two years later, the President of the twelfth conference argued that higher education might be recommended only for a few motivated and talented women, for the rest elementary education would suffice, along with instructions on household chores as well as appropriate training which would make them deferential to the gods and their elders.[132] In this last point resonate the pleas of Dhirendra Laha's powerful article on female education, which we have referred to earlier. It had appeared a year earlier in their caste journal, recommending for their women the same ancient forms of education that had produced those legendary heroines of Hindu tradition—Sabitri, Khana, Gargee, Maitrayee—who were still worshipped in every household.[133] Here the lower caste discourse on female education comes full circle and converges with the revivalist nationalists' cultural construction of the essence of Indian womanhood and its place in the modern project of national regeneration.

It is not correct to suggest once again that there was complete consensus on this point. Of course, there were dissident voices, as a few articles in the *Mahishya Samaj* prescribed Western education for the mental and spiritual development of their women, and even welcomed the prospect of some of them leaving their homes and familiar surroundings to attend higher educational institutions.[134] It is also a fact that this debate was less audible in the dalit literature, as female education had made so little progress among them as to pose no real threat to family discipline or patriarchal authority. But the majority of the educated peasant and trading castes, like their higher caste counterparts, dreaded their 'over educated' women and favoured only that kind of female education that would benefit the family and the community.

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[131] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1323 B.S.
[132] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1331 B.S.; Magh 1333 B.S.
[133] Dhirendra Kumar Laha, *'Streesiksha'*, *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Agrahayan 1332 B.S.
[134] See *Mahishya Samaj*, Kartik 1325 B.S.; Bhadra 1329 B.S.

VI

It is clear from the discussion above that all the peasant and trading castes had embraced a new model of womanhood that stood at the epistemological intersection between modernity and Brahmanical patriarchy. It has been shown by a number of historians that from the late nineteenth century the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* had been trying to construct and reify the image of the chaste and loyal wife, the *grihalakshmi* or the *patibrata nari*. For Dipesh Chakrabarty, the imagery of *grihalakshmi* symbolised the *bhadralok's* attempt to celebrate the 'difference' of Indian culture, resisting the dominance of a universalising colonial modernity. It signified that 'the highest form of personhood was one constituted by the idea of self-sacrifice, the idea of living for others', as opposed to bourgeois individualism preached through the Eurocentric discourses of liberation. Chakrabarty does not deny the violence concealed in this process of the patriarchal reconstruction of Indian womanhood,[135] but Tanika Sarkar foregrounds this violence and reads in this teleological reconstruction the colonial male's endeavour to rewrite the power relations within the family. Squeezed out of power through subordination to a colonial regime in the public space, the domestic sphere seemed to be the only autonomous space where they could exert their dominance and control, initiate reform and manipulate its results. However, if this reconstituted domestic space signified a moment of triumph for Hindu masculinity, it was also a cause of dilemma for Hindu nationalism, for its inherent tyranny directly questioned the nation's claim to freedom.[136] What is interesting however is the way all these debates that dominated Bengali printed public space in the late nineteenth century began to reappear in the middle and lower caste texts in the early twentieth, with almost the same ideological underpinnings. In this discourse nation is not displaced by caste, but the word *'jati'* is used interchangeably to signify both these social collectives.

In the journals of the middle peasant and trading castes, first of all, this re-imagining of womanhood takes place within a discursive space marked by a few important ideological strands derived directly from the Hindu revivalist nationalist discourse. First of all, this ideal woman is historically located in ancient India, which was graced by such

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[135] D. Chakrabarty, 'The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity', see especially pp. 82–87.

[136] T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, chapter 1.

illustrious women as 'Sita, Sabitri, Damayanti, Arundhati' who were valorised as ideal models to be followed by the women of later years.[137] This portrayal of the high status of women in the Vedic age, which ignores the servile *dasis* of the same period, mimics a similar silence in the nationalist discourse;[138] it then moves on to a narrative of decline in the medieval period, marked by the ascendancy of Islam.[139] It was due to this upheaval of the middle ages, which 'shook the nation like an earthquake', wrote an article in *Mahishya Mahila*, that Indian women began to lose their freedom, their erudition, their mental refinements and became just physical beings confined to the home.[140] The leap from medieval decline to the more recent regeneration of womanhood is then mediated by the intervention of modernity, through the realisation that educated or, more precisely, properly educated women lay behind the improvement of all nations.[141] This education would not mean Westernisation, but the cultivation of the 'natural' feminine qualities of an Indian woman, such as 'simplicity, beauty, softness, trustworthiness, compassion, pity [and] self-reliance'; 'toleration, sacrifice and self-control' were the attributes that adorned a perfect woman.[142] An ideal wife would combine in her both beauty and these qualities—she should be *'rupe Lakshmi, gune Saraswati*' (beautiful as the goddess Lakshmi and as learned as the goddess Saraswati), as a short novel appearing in *Mahishya Mahila* described such an ideal wife.[143]

The most appropriate space where such qualities could blossom was the home. The short play in *Sadgop Patrika,* which we have referred to earlier, sought to resolve the ambiguities generated by female education through a concluding statement of one of its characters: 'women have to come back and stay at home alongside men—it is there that they have their right place.... Women cannot unsettle their ordained fate.'[144] This trope of 'fate' and 'natural' division of

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[137] *'Barsharambhe prarthana', Mahishya Mahila*, Ashwin–Kartik 1321.

[138] See Uma Chakaraborty, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past', in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: 1999), pp. 27–87.

[139] N. Mukhopadhyay, *'Hindu samaje narir sthan'*.

[140] Amodini Ghosh, '*Matrisakti—Bharatiya Streemandalir nikat abedan', Mahishya Mahila*, Chaitra–Baisakh 1321–22 B.S.

[141] N. De, *'Duti katha'.*

[142] P. Mullick, *'Stree sikshar prayojaniyota'.*

[143] *'Basanta Kusum', Mahishya Mahila'*, Chaitra–Baisakh 1320–21 B.S.

[144] *Chaturbarga*', *Sadgop Patrika*, Sraban–Bhadra 1343 B.S.

space between male and female spheres abounds in this literature. An article in *Mahishya Samaj* compares the family to the universe, where the latter is protected and controlled by God, the *Karta* or the patriarch does the same for the family and all the present unhappiness in the world, it argues, is due to our defiance of the *Karta*.[145] In this cherished moral order women had their prescribed dharma of maintaining their chastity and serving their husbands and family. A woman's softness, beauty and loyalty entitled her to the protection of the *Karta*, whose relationship with her was variable and intergenerational, but one that ensured her perpetual dependence. An editorial in the *Mahishya Mahila* thus reiterates the age-old dictum of Hindu patriarchy: 'In childhood, women should be under the control of their fathers, in youth under the control of their husbands and after the latter's death, under the control of their sons. But never should they remain independent.'[146] This prescribed dependence was rationalised in terms of their innate physical weakness, their lack of 'strength necessary for self-defence'.[147] The women were thus disempowered, aestheticised as 'Grihalakshmi',[148] and situated in a hierarchy of dependence defined by gender and age. This was indeed the recast Brahmanical model of womanhood, which the peasant and trading caste women were now called upon to emulate. But this was not just a celebration of Indian difference, as to legitimise this position there was also a constant search for parallels in the West. When Lady Hardinge died in July 1914, the *Mahishya Mahila* paid a tribute to her, describing her as a *'sadhvi sati'* (wise, chaste woman), who had nursed her husband with the utmost devotion when he was wounded in Delhi in a bomb throwing incident, and had thus given evidence of her 'true female self' (*'adarsha nari charitrer parichay pradan koriyachhilen'*).[149] In other words, what was being advocated was deemed to be of universal value, located very much in the project of modernity.

Although home was defined as their natural domain, these women were also called upon to participate in the social movement started for the uplift of their castes, just as they were later enlisted in the service of the nation. But as in the latter case, it was not so much a call to step out of their courtyards and move into the open field

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[145] Dhanapatinath Das, *'Om Srimandir'*, *Mahishya Samaj*, Sraban 1329 B.S.
[146] *Mahishya Mahila*, Agrahayan–Paush 1318 B.S.
[147] *Mahishya Samaj*, Falgun 1323 B.S.
[148] *Subarnabanik Samachar*, Magh 1327 B.S.
[149] *Mahishya Mahila*, Jaishtha–Ashadh 1321 B.S.

of politics as independent individuals. 'Men have become involved in the Mahishya movement', wrote *Mahishya Mahila* in 1912. 'We should also participate in it. Otherwise, the movement will not be successful. The wife has no other dharma, the husband's dharma is her dharma. Men consider this as their dharma. We should therefore also accept it as our dharma too.'[150] And how did the men define the role of women in this social movement? As *Mahishya Samaj* prescribed their duties, it left no doubt as to where they stood in this scheme of things. They should behave like respectable women, it argued, and use the surname 'Devi', as was the practice among the high caste women. They should teach their children, relatives and other less conscious women that the name of their caste was Mahishya and not Chasi Kaibartta. And finally, they should perform their familial duties and religious rites and rituals in such a way that the larger Hindu society could accept them as a respectable caste.[151] In short, they should embrace their new imagined identity and reproduce the Brahmanical ritual codes, which were a pre-requisite for status within the Hindu caste hierarchy.

As womanhood was being re-conceptualised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal, women themselves seemed to have been socialised into these new ideologies and themselves became instrumental in the gradual universalisation of the same. As a print culture emerged and female literacy progressed, women's magazines and publications became the new conduits for the dissemination of such ideas of new womanhood. For example, articles appeared in *Bamabodhini Patrika* which contributed to this process of re-imagining,[152] as did books like Dayamayi Dasi's *Patibrata Dharma*, published in 1870, which has been described by Dipesh Chakrabarty as a 'paean to the patriarchy of the kula'.[153] This was re-enacted again at a lower level, as the lower caste literature began to develop and literacy spread in the early twentieth century. The *Mahishya Mahila* is an ideal case in point. It was a women's journal of a peasant caste, the first and only one of its kind. A Mahishya woman, Krishnabhabini Biswas, edited it and most of its contributors were women and most of its readers Mahishya and other women. It was started in 1911 and

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[150] *Mahishya Mahila*, Jaishtha–Ashadh 1319 B.S.
[151] *Mahishya Samaj*, Sraban 1318 B.S.
[152] Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (New Delhi: 2002), pp. 41–42.
[153] D. Chakrabarty, 'The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity', pp. 61, 86–87.

three years later an editorial in the anniversary issue argued that the purpose of the journal had been to save Indian womanhood from their present state of degradation and reinstate them in their past glory when they were well known in the world for their chastity, service, hospitality, love and devotion. And how did *Mahishya Mahila* see its role? Previously, the editor argued, the Brahman *kathaks* would sing ballads celebrating the virtues of the great and wise women of ancient times that served as a guide to the womenfolk to the correct religious path. But since this great oral tradition had fallen into disuse, *Mahishya Mahila* would take on the role of imparting 'correct education' to women.[154] In other words, it saw its role as that of ensuring a continuity between a rural tradition of orality and a modern print culture that could be used to universalise a model of womanhood reinvented from the ancient one.

In a mission statement *Mahishya Mahila* argued that it was women who made or ruined families. Therefore, for their proper education, it would present articles dealing with 'female dharma, *shastriya* ethics, historical anecdotes, biographies of great men, and in addition, some useful recipes and cooking methods'.[155] It published short stories and feature articles with themes that specifically focused on proper feminine behaviour, chastity and devotion to the husband.[156] It published essays, such as the serialised *'Nababibahita balikar prati'* (To a newly wed girl) by Indunivanani, containing a series of useful advice to a newly married girl. 'Even if the husband is ugly and does not earn', advises Indunivanani, 'he should not be shown disrespect to or be neglected.... [For] he is her greatest guru.' After marriage a woman should not think of anyone other than her husband, and without his permission should not even see a male doctor![157] For chastity was their 'invaluable asset'; if once lost it could not be retrieved again. 'We Indian women,' wrote an editorial, 'chastity is our ornament, serving the husband is our traditional dharma. In it we find our shelter, our enjoyment, our salvation.'[158] It is possible

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[154] *'Barsharambhe prarthana', Mahishya Mahila*, Aswin–Kartik 1321 B.S.

[155] *Mahishya Mahila*, Sraban–Bhadra 1321 B.S.

[156] See for example, '*Santa sundarir adrishta', 'Swami o stree', 'Bangali kumarir jahar brata', 'Swargiya pramilabala', 'Swamir janyo pran utsarga', 'Basanta kusum', 'Patibrata sandilir katha'* in various issues of *Mahishya Mahila*, Aswin–Kartik, Magh–Falgun 1320 B.S., Chaitra–Baisakh 1320–21 B.S., Jaishtha–Ashadh 1321 B.S.

[157] Indunivanani, *'Nababibahita balikar prati', Mahishya Mahila,* Sraban–Bhadra 1321 B.S.

[158] *'Satitva', Mahishya Mahila*, Magh–Falgun 1321 B.S.

to read in this statement a celebration of Indian difference, but it is at the same time difficult to miss the pathos concealed in it.

However, *Mahishya Mahila* was not univocal in preaching a pliant wifehood for all Mahishya women. It also published a spirited article by Amodini Ghosh, with the title, '*Matrisakti—Bharatiya strimandalir nikat abedan*' (The Power of Motherhood—An Appeal to Indian Women), which gave a clarion call to mothers to rise, assert themselves and claim their rights from their sons. Ghosh does not blow away the markers that separate the male and female spheres of action, but urges her readers to look beyond this mundane quotidian existence. It is in the rise of women that the nation will arise as well, she argues, but this is not to be a rise through pride, arrogance, conflict and contest or for selfish reasons. It would be a rise through love, affection, sacrifice and tolerance, which would confer real selfhood on women, and thus would help the nation to rise on its feet.[159] The aesthetics of this more spiritual appeal separates it from the brazen valorisation of chastity mentioned above; but it does not transgress the boundaries of reconstituted womanhood that we find in the narratives of nationalism.

This teleological construction of the *pativrata nari* is not just the hallmark of the middle peasant or trading caste texts; it was shared by the dalits as well. That the Namasudras were gradually embracing the Hindu patriarchal family structure to value female chastity and idolise the more exalted model of womanhood is evident in the songs of the Matua sect, which was mainly subscribed to by the members of this caste. These songs have been compiled and published by the Matua Mahasangha and have run into several editions, indicating their popularity and outreach. The ideal chaste woman is she who worships the feet of her husband, says one of their songs, and for her no other form of worship is necessary to attain salvation, says another. And women in this epistemological construction come to be regarded as the most authentic representation of *maya* or as obstacles in the path of spiritual salvation. 'I have succumbed to the mysterious charm of woman', goes another song. 'I do not know how I shall undertake my spiritual duties, as I have been bemused by maya.'[160] It is not difficult to read in these songs a resonance of the teachings

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[159] Amodini Ghosh, *'Matrisakti—Bharatiya strimandalir nikat abedan', Mahishya Mahila,* Chaitra–Baisakh, 1321–22 B.S., Jaishtha–Ashadh 1322 B.S.

[160] *Matua Sangeet,* Part I, compiled by Matua Mahasangha (sixth edn, Thakurnagar: 1393 B.S.), pp. 51, 78, 109–11, 113, 117.

of Ramakrishna cautioning his modern *bhadralok* disciples against the lure of *kamini–kanchan* (women and wealth).

However, it is in the case of the Rajbansis that we can summon more direct textual evidence to indicate the dilemmas of modernity vis-à-vis the emerging models of femininity. An article appeared in their journal *Kshatriya* in 1924 with the title *'Narir rup'* or 'woman's beauty', which was located in her delicate frame, in her tenderness, modesty and above all in her love and devotion to the husband. Another article from the following year contained a veiled indictment of the urban educated women who were about to cause a 'great social upheaval', while another presented a not so oblique adoration of *sati* as the ultimate evidence of the spiritual power of Indian women.[161] This whole argument about women being physically weak fitted well into the Rajbansis' Sanskritising claim of Kshatriyahood, which entailed a duty to protect the weak and the vulnerable.[162] It was also an argument taken from the modern Hindu masculinist discourse of 'abduction' of the 1920s, based on the stereotype of feminine victimisation necessitating male protection. The stories of Hindu women being abducted by hypersexual Muslims in east Bengal and organised efforts to protect them, as Pradip Datta has shown,[163] started around 1923 and involved the Rajbansis who internalised the eugenicist concerns of the Hindu leadership. The *Kshatriya* published numerous stories of rape and abduction and the annual convention of their Kshatriya Samiti in 1925 not only reported 300 cases of abuse of women in the last one and a half year, but also proclaimed the prevention of this social felony as the quintessential 'Kshatriya dharma'.[164]

However, the relationship between the masculinist discourses at different levels of Hindu society was more complex than linear. First of all, there was not just a one-way absorption of ideas, but reciprocal appropriation of symbols. Among the Rajbansis, the orchestrated campaign to invoke the power of the local deity *Dangdhari Mao* (club wielding mother) to arouse male pride became symbolic of their concern for the safety of women. A poem with the title, *Dangdhari Mao*, written in the local north Bengal dialect, which aroused chivalrous passion among the Rajbansi males, was then reprinted in the high class Calcutta newspaper *Dainik Basumati* and became popular

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[161] *Kshatriya*, Kartik 1331 B.S., Bhadra, Ashadh 1332 B.S.
[162] *Kshatriya*, Aswin 1332 B.S.
[163] P. K. Datta, *Carving Blocs*, pp. 148–71.
[164] See for example, *Kshatriya*, Bhadra, Kartik, Agrahayan, Sraban 1332 B.S.

among those involved in this anti-'abduction' movement in the metropolis.[165] There were also some points of disjuncture or contestation between the discourses at the two levels. However much the Hindu Mahasabha might try to appropriate the Rajbansi campaign into its own project of Hindu mass mobilisation, the discourse of abduction as it was presented on the pages of *Kshatriya* was less certain about communal polarisation as a social given. At least two articles appeared in 1924 making a case for involving both the Hindus and the Muslims in this campaign against the rape and abuse of women, while another was more specific in arguing that both the communities had members among them who were driven by lust and animal passion—and both had their share of good people.[166] This discourse could also not conceal a few discordant feminine voices. Bimala Debi, probably one of the few literate Rajbansi women, wrote a spirited article with the title *'Samasya'* (crisis), in which she directly linked the abuse of women to the introduction of the restrictions of *purdah*. She argued that women had never before been subjected to any restrictions on their freedom. 'Such restrictions have been imposed to some degree in recent years. Perhaps it is not all that bad. But unfortunately, I have to say that abuse of women has increased after its introduction. Never before we heard of any such incidents.'[167] The *Kshatriya* also reprinted a letter from *Dainik Basumati*, written by three high caste women, Sarojini Ghosh, Swarnaprava Guha and Swarnalata Ray, demanding tougher sentences for the rapists. But the letter also contained a not so veiled criticism of the cowardice and selfishness of a society and its men who refused to rehabilitate the rape victims back into the family and community.[168]

VII

The evidence of contestation mentioned above stops us from writing a linear narrative of the universalisation of Brahmanical gender codes and the modern reified models of womanhood. The textual evidence

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[165] *Kshatriya*, Baisakh, Jaishtha, Ashadh, Sraban 1331 B.S.
[166] See *'Nari niryatan'* and *'Nari niryatan nibaran o atmarakshartha rakshasebak'*, in *Kshatriya*, Baisakh 1331 B.S.; Kesablal Basu, '*Abadan*', *Kshatriya*, Bhadra 1331 B.S.
[167] Bimala Debi, '*Samasya*', *Kshatriya*, Chaitra 1331 B.S.
[168] *Kshatriya*, Jaishtha 1331 B.S.

cited above indicates only the nature of debate going on among the literate *bhadralok,* not the actual situation prevailing in the entire community. Not all Rajbansi women were exposed to the de-empowering discourse of abduction and certainly not all of them had lost their autonomy by submitting to it. This was proved in their active role in the Tebhaga movement, the sharecroppers' struggle for a two-thirds share of their produce, which rocked north Bengal in 1946 under the leadership of the communists and the Kisan Sabha. Through their own initiative they formed *nari bahinis* or women's brigades and resisted the colonial police with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on and in the uneven contest that followed many of them became martyrs.[169] The same was true for the Mahishya women too, as they took an active part in the Quit India Movement in Midnapur, formed the *Bhagini Sena* or the women's volunteer corps and participated in the activities of the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar or the 'national government' in the Tamluk subdivision.[170]

Even the caste journals did not always represent a consensus among the literate sections of the communities or always inspire their members. And if multivocality of literature is evidence of dissent, silence is even more eloquent. The average circulation of these journals ranged from 1000 to 1200.[171] Even this small number of subscribers did not remain consistently committed. In 1914 *Mahishya Mahila* recorded its disappointment when about two hundred of its subscribers returned their copies of the journal sent to them by post.[172] In other words, the process of hegemonisation of the new gender ideology had never been as absolute as to encourage the assumption of the stifling of all contesting voices and elimination of all spaces of autonomy. What this essay highlights however is the greater tendency towards an inverse relationship between social mobility and the status of women, as evidenced in both the changing social situation of women and the textual debates in the caste literature, indicating a glaring contradiction of colonial modernity. A major social development of this period was the fracturing of castes along

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[169] P. Custers, 'Women's Role in Tebhaga Movement', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Review of Women Studies, 23 October 31 1986, pp. WS-97–104.

[170] See Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism: Midnapur 1919–1944* (New Delhi: 1997); and Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'The Quit India Movement in Medinipur District', in G. Pandey (ed.), *The Indian Nation in 1942* (Calcutta: 1988), pp. 19–76.

[171] See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj,* Appendix 1.

[172] *Mahishya Mahila*, Sraban–Bhadra 1321 B.S.

class lines,[173] and a new counter-elite embracing and universalising the norms of behaviour that encoded superiority of status, and this meant reproducing the Brahmanical gender codes and then re-grafting the more modernist concepts of genteel and chaste womanhood into their own discourse of progress. Their endeavour was neither without dilemmas nor was it uncontested, and their success was never absolute. But the net losers in the process were the women belonging to the middle peasant and trading castes and some of the better off dalit groups, as they had to bear the burden of reproducing purity and guarding the honour of their respective communities. This also indicates the critical importance of introducing gender as a discursive category into our studies of lower caste social and political movements in colonial and post-colonial India.

[173] I have discussed this aspect in S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*; more recently, Sumit Sarkar has re-emphasised it in his *Beyond Nationalist Frames*.

5

Caste and the Territorial Nation

The Hindu Mahasabha, Partition and the Dalit

I

When Bengal was about to be partitioned in 1947 into two parts, which were then to become a part of two independent nation-states, Pakistan and India, political alignments in this region also changed significantly. The situation indicated very clearly that there was nothing 'essential' about community boundaries in colonial South Asia, as far as political action was concerned; these were constructed by the collective imagination influenced by specific historical context. So, as the context changed and the prospect of a new politico-geographical boundary threatened to divide the communities living in the borderlands, the community boundaries also began to shift, new political loyalties were born and new alliances made.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate this process by focusing on the political behaviour of the dalit or the Scheduled Castes of Bengal, who had maintained since the early twentieth century their distance from the high caste Hindus and their politics, and often in alliance with the Muslims had actively opposed their political movements. This political alignment began to change on the eve of Partition, as the Hindu political organisations now successfully mobilised the dalit in their battle against the Muslim League and its demand for Pakistan, and later for the partitioning of the province and the creation of a 'Hindu homeland' in West Bengal, that would remain within the Indian Union. This chapter seeks to understand how, in the context

of Partition politics, 'religion' replaced 'caste' as the defining criterion for community boundaries in the collective imagination and political action of the dalit. It also intends to show how ideologically and strategically Hindu nationalism proposed to confront the problem of mobilising the dalit, without whose participation its idea of a territorially defined Hindu nation would not gain the necessary legitimacy.

The dalit of Bengal became particularly involved in the Partition related movement because they were to be very directly affected by it. The two most important communities, who dominated dalit politics in this province, were the Namasudras and the Rajbansis. The Namasudras, who were earlier known as the Chandals of Bengal, lived mainly in the eastern districts of Dacca, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna, all of which went to East Pakistan, forcing many of them to migrate across the new international boundary to the state of West Bengal in India.[1] On the other hand, a section of the Kochs of north Bengal, living in the districts of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and the princely state of Cooch Behar, came to be known as the Rajbansis from the late nineteenth century.[2] Of those districts, Rangpur and parts of Dinajpur went to East Pakistan, while the rest remained in West Bengal. In other words, the international political boundary that came into existence in 1947 cut across ethnic boundaries, so far as the dalit were concerned, and resulted in the uprooting of these two groups of people from their territorial anchorage. There was, therefore, every reason for these groups to be involved in the Partition agitation.

We have already discussed in the first chapter how in the early twentieth century their social claims for high status were being converted into political demands for separate representation in the legislature, reservation of jobs in the public services and seats in educational institutions. These demands were not just expressions of political self-interest, but were based on a different ideological construction of colonial rule and a different perception of history. As the Hindu nationalists began to invoke a glorious Hindu past as an inspiration for nation building, these people at the bottom of the social hierarchy began to consider the present an improvement over an imagined darker past. They regarded British rule as a good thing,

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[1] For a detailed history of the Namasudras, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (Richmond, Surrey: 1997).

[2] For a detailed history of the Rajbansis, see Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910–1947* (New Delhi: 2003).

viewing it as having overthrown the codes of Manu and establishing equality in an otherwise hierarchical society. The nationalist movement, therefore, appeared to them as an attempt to set the clock back—an endeavour by the higher castes to restore their slipping grip over society. This alienation from the caste Hindus and their politics, it needs to be emphasised, was not just confined to the leaders of these communities; it was common among the peasant masses too.[3]

What emerges from this situation is a picture of a divided Hindu society in Bengal—a rather familiar picture to be found in practically every other part of India as well. This self-distancing of the lower castes from the dominant high caste Hindu social and political organisations, described by some as 'alienation', condemned by others as 'separatism', is also a well known phenomenon—indeed this has become a cliche' in India's colonial social and political history. But what this familiar literature does not mention is that in the 1940s, that is, immediately before Partition, the political behaviour of the lower caste peasantry, particularly in the border districts, demonstrated remarkable shifts in their political allegiance. As far as Bengal was concerned, there is a strong indication to suggest that at a general level the dalit masses at this stage were developing a greater identification with the Hindu community, and that this Hinduisation, at least for the time being, overshadowed their caste identity.[4]

The existing literature on communalism in Bengal, or more particularly the Partition literature, either ignores this phenomenon totally, or fails to fathom its real extent and significance. For example, Suranjan Das's otherwise comprehensive study of communal riots in Bengal leaves out this aspect of lower caste mobilisation because of the alleged scarcity of source materials.[5] Nor does Partha Chatterjee's essay on the 'Second Partition of Bengal' shed much light on the dalit position vis-à-vis the Muslim League and the Congress–Mahasabha propaganda.[6] It is only Joya Chatterji's book, *Bengal Divided*, which

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[3] For more details on the political movements of the dalit of Bengal, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872–1937* (Calcutta: 1990), chapter 4.

[4] I have discussed these tendencies of the Bengal dalit in an earlier essay. See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal, 1937–47', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 31, no. 3, July–September 1994, pp. 349–91.

[5] Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905–1947* (New Delhi: 1993), p. 3.

[6] Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi: 1997), pp. 27–46. For example, if we talk about the

discusses 'communal mobilisation' of the lower castes in the 1940s and identifies it as an 'extremely significant shift in the pattern of communal violence' in Bengal. But then, she leaves the subject halfway, describing it as 'an interesting subject for further research', and goes on to explain partitioning of Bengal primarily in terms of *bhadralok* initiative and enthusiasm.[7] Dalit participation in the Partition campaign therefore remains a relatively neglected area in an otherwise rich literature. It is even more important as it raises significant questions about our received wisdom regarding an essentialised and alienated dalit identity and its problematic relationship with nationalism and the Indian nation-state.

The relationship of the dalit with Hindu nationalism remains an important problematic of Indian history and it afflicts politics even more today. As Ghanshyam Shah has recently noted: 'The major challenge for the proponents of Hindutva is to unify all Hindus without disturbing dominance of the upper castes and classes.'[8] It was not surprising, therefore, that when in November 1989 the foundation stone of the Ram Mandir was laid in Ayodhya a dalit from Bihar was invited to place the first brick.[9] Since then the Hindu nationalist groups in India have launched a systematic campaign to enlist the support of the dalit and the other backward castes (OBCs), as their very existence poses the greatest challenge to Hindutva politics. Their success became evident in a spectacular way in the Gujarat riots in early 2002, when the rioting Hindu mob had a large presence of dalit, OBCs and the *adivasi* (tribals).[10] The construction of this broad-based Hindu brotherhood, opposed to its universal Other, the Muslims, is obviously the result of a long drawn out ideological campaign. Referring to it, the dalit scholar, Kancha Ilaih expresses his surprise in his 1996 *Subaltern Studies* article: 'since the 1990s Hindu politicians, writers, sadhus, and *sanyasis*… drummed it into our ears… that

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Depressed Classes' leaders, the majority of them had been defying the 'hegemonic gestures of the Muslim League' (p. 40) from about 1938–39. Thus, it was nothing new when it happened in 1947.

[7] Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932–1947* (Cambridge: 1995), pp. 191–203, and footnote no. 57. She claims subsequently that, '…it was the Hindu bhadralok of the Hindu-majority districts of western Bengal… who formed the core of the partition movement. And it was the bhadralok to whom the propaganda for partition was addressed…' (pp. 240–41).

[8] Ghanshyam Shah, 'Caste, Hindutva and Hideousness', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 April 2002.

[9] *The Telegraph*, 11 November 1989.

[10] Rajdeep Sardesai, 'Beyond Ideology', *The Indian Express*, 9 April 2002.

everyone in India, who is not a Muslim, a Christian, or a Sikh, is a Hindu.'[11] Ghanshaym Shah pushes back the beginning of this ideological campaign by another 20 years to the 1970s.[12] What this chapter will try to demonstrate, however, is that the leaders of Hindu nationalism had seriously contemplated this campaign back in the 1920s and launched it with all vigour in the late 1930s, as they were alive to the need of mobilising the dalit as a necessary step towards enhancing Hindu solidarity. When we try to understand the strategies employed by the BJP today for winning dalit political support, we usually look at the RSS for historical precedent. But more realistically, it is the policies and strategies of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, which was more a political organisation, that can offer better parallels to understand the realities of the present. In this chapter we will show how ideologically and strategically the Hindu Mahasabha proposed to negotiate the hurdle of hierarchy and confront the problem of mobilising the dalit and also the *adivasi*, without whose participation its idea of a territorially defined Hindu nation would not gain the necessary legitimacy. It will be shown that particularly the dalit of Bengal, though not the *adivasi*, were successfully mobilised by the Hindu Mahasabha in its battle against the Muslim League and its demand for Pakistan, and later for a partition of the province and the creation of a 'Hindu homeland' in West Bengal, that would remain within the Indian Union.

II

Pradip Datta's book *Carving Blocs*[13] has shown the existence of a 'Hindu communal common sense' in early twentieth century Bengal that traced its origins from U. N. Mukherjee's book *The Dying Race*, published in 1909. The major feature of this discourse was a concern for the future of the Hindu race, which was losing out to the Muslims. One of the supposed reasons for this was definitely the conversion of the dalit. This led to another concern for the physical power of the Hindu community for which too the dalit and also the *adivasis*

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[11] Kancha Ilaih, 'Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative', in S. Amin and D. Chakrabarty (eds), *Subaltern Studies IX*: *Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: 1996), p. 166.

[12] Ghanshyam Shah, 'Caste, Hindutva and Hideousness'.

[13] Pradip Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-century Bengal* (New Delhi: 1999).

were vitally important. The tribals and also the dalit were thought to be the only groups that represented masculinity in colonial Bengali society that was constantly being stereotyped as effeminate by the colonial masters.[14] Stories of the militant tradition of the Santhals date back to the mid-nineteenth century, when the Santhal rebellion struck terror in the hearts of the *bhadralok*, and in rural Bengal the *lathiyal* retinues of most zamindars came from dalit groups like the Bagdis, Namasudras or Patnis. So, for projecting the martial qualities of the Bengali Hindus as a 'race',[15] inclusion and mobilisation of the dalit and the *adivasis* had become a political necessity.

A number of Hindu religious organisations, therefore, embarked upon a project to mobilise such groups. For example, the Hindu Mission from the 1930s onward clearly realised that in order to thwart what was conceived of as a Muslim threat, it was essential to mobilise the lower caste segments of the Bengali Hindu population.[16] From December–January 1934–35, Swami Pranabananda of Bharat Sebashram Sangha started working among the Namasudras, Paundra-Kshatriyas and other dalit villagers in the four districts of Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Bakarganj. From 1938 onward he intensified his efforts to organise the Hindu community of eastern Bengal in a more militant way—and the keynote of his message was the mobilisation of the untouchables and the lower castes so that instead of defecting from the Hindu camp they could enhance its muscle power.[17] Around 1938 the Mission was actively working for the uplift of the poor Namasudras in areas like Pirojpur in Bakarganj district or Nawabganj in Malda.[18] These efforts continued into the 1940s with the active assistance of such prominent dalit leaders as Patiram Roy of the Paundra-Kshatriya caste, who addressed dalit meetings organised by the Sangha, where issues like conversion and *suddhi* were discussed along with the problems of spreading primary education.[19]

However, most crucial in this respect were the endeavours of the All India Hindu Mahasabha. Since the late 1920s the Mahasabha leaders

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[14] See John Roselli, 'The Self-image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Past and Present*, vol. 86, 1980.
[15] Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, 'The Effeminate and the Masculine: Nationalism and the Concept of Race in Colonial Bengal', in Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (New Delhi: 1995), p. 290.
[16] Gurudas Ray, *Asprisyer Marmabedana* (Calcutta: n.d. [1933?]), p. 10.
[17] Swami Vedananda, *Sree Sree Jugacharyya Jiban Charit* (Calcutta: 1398 B.S.), pp. 355, 379–86.
[18] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 April 1938; *Hindustan Standard*, 21 June 1938.
[19] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 March 1941.

were claiming that the Hindus were a natural birth-community of India. This definition was obviously derived from Veer Savarkar's book, *Hindutva—Who is a Hindu?,* published in 1923, where he underscored the underlying unity among the Hindus:

> And no word can give full expression to this racial unity of our people as the epithet, Hindu does. Some of us were Aryans and some Anaryans [sic]: but Ayars and Nayars—we were all Hindus and own a common blood. Some of us are Brahmans and some Namashudras or Panchamas; but Brahmans or Chandalas—we are all Hindus and own a common blood.... Some of us are monists, some pantheists, some theists and some atheists. But monotheists or atheists—we are all Hindus and own a common blood. We are not only a nation but a Jati, a born brotherhood. Nothing else counts, it is after all a question of heart. We feel that the same ancient blood that coursed through the veins of Ram and Krishna, Buddha and Mahavir, Nanak and Chaitanya, Basava and Madhava, of Rohidas and Tiruvelluvar courses throughout Hindudom from vein to vein, pulsates from heart to heart.[20]

Savarkar's definition of the Hindu race, despite his emphasis on 'common blood', seems to be less biological and more territorial and cultural, 'blood' being used as a trope for culture. In this framework, both Aryans and non-Aryans were a part of Hindudom and it sufficed if they followed any of the religions born within the territorial boundaries of India—thus, to use Homi Bhabha's phrase, 'turning Territory into Tradition' in the project of imagining the nation.[21] By that definition, the Santhals (a tribal community) of north Bengal were certainly Hindus and now there was an organised campaign to instill in them a sense of belonging to the Hindu community and to mobilise them in defence of the Hindu religion. Tanika Sarkar has already shown how the district of Malda became particularly well known for such mobilisation of the tribals. This Hinduisation process which started around 1924 and ended in Jitu Santhal's attack on the Adina mosque in 1932, could not completely break the autonomy of Santhal culture or destroy what Sarkar defines as the 'independence of tribal politics'.[22] But a trend was set and in subsequent years, the

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[20] Quoted in Christoffe Jaffrelot, 'The Idea of the Hindu Race in the Writings of the Hindu Nationalist Ideologues in the 1920s and 1930s: A Concept Between Two Cultures', in Peter Robb, *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, pp. 334–35.
[21] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: 1994), p. 149.
[22] Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924–1932', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: 1985), pp. 157 and passim.

experiment was repeated in other north Bengal districts with varying degrees of success.

The Mahasabha ever since it started functioning in Bengal in 1923 also targeted the lower caste peasantry for political mobilisation as a part of its campaign for Hindu *Sangathan* (organisation). Its first provincial meeting in 1924 was held in Serajgunj, which was a centre well known for the movement of the Rajbansis, who had already formed their association, the Kshatriya Samiti, and were publishing a monthly journal, *Kshatriya*. A number of Rajbansis including their charismatic leader Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma attended the Mahasabha conference and their journal carried detailed reports of the proceedings. What seems to have appealed to the Rajbansis was perhaps the anti-untouchability thrust of the Hindu unity agenda. The oath of allegiance that every member was supposed to sign at Serajganj, as the *Kshatriya* report mentions, included a clause that required them to behave humanely towards the backward castes, to abolish untouchability and to accept water from their hands at the behest of the Mahasabha.[23] From now on almost every issue of their journal published reports on the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha and publicised the need for promoting Hindu solidarity and the elimination of untouchability. A Hindu was defined as some one who believed in a religion born in India, such as Sanatani, Arya Samaji, Jain, Sikh, Buddhist and Brahmo. And they were all to be brought under the one umbrella of Hindu *Sangathan*, as 'the number of the Hindus was going down everyday, while that of the Muslims was increasing'![24] This Hindu solidarity project also fitted well into the Sanskritising claims of the Rajbansis for a Kshatriya status, which had already brought them closer to the all-India Kshatriya movement led by the Maharaja of Alwar.[25] The Kshatriya status and the Hindu identity would give them a respectable and ancient genealogy. Upholding and going by the appropriate codes of dharma, according to the right advice of the Brahmans, therefore became a sacred shibboleth of the Rajbansi movement.[26] This Hindu agenda came through

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[23] *'Hindu Mahasabha'*, *Kshatriya*, Baisakh 1331 B.S.

[24] See for example, *'Bibidha Prasanga: Hindu Sangathan o Hindu Sabha'*, *Kshatriya*, Sraban 1331 B.S.

[25] *'Rajput Mahasabha'*, *Kshatriya*, Agrahayan 1331 B.S.

[26] See, Shyamaprasad Barma, *'Jatiya Unnatite Dharmer Abasyikata'*, *Kshatriya*, Baisakh 1327 B.S.; Rajendranath Goswami, *'Guru'*, *Kshatriya*, Jaistha–Ashadh 1327 B.S.; Nabadwip Chandra Raybarma, *'Samajik Abanati'*, *Kshatriya*, Sraban–Bhadra 1327 B.S.; *'Samajik Chinta'*, *Kshatriya*, Ashadh 1331 B.S.

very clearly at the fifteenth annual conference of their Kshatriya Samiti in 1924–the year of the Serajganj Hindu conference. The resolutions adopted here included those on the protection of the *shastra* (religious scriptures) and *swadharma* (appropriate religious codes of behaviour) and promotion of Hindu solidarity by bringing in those who were striving to achieve social development and self-respect.[27] Henceforth, the themes of their unity festivals (*mahamilan mahotsab*), which were previously used only to promote caste solidarity, included the promotion of Hindu *Sangathan*.[28] A year later in 1925 the *Kshatriya* enthusiastically reported the proceedings of the Kanpur Hindu Mahasabha conference, where the president, Lala Lajpat Rai, had announced that untouchability was the main impediment to Hindu unity and therefore it needed to be removed as soon as possible.[29] However, this alliance did not last very long, as within two years the Rajbansi leader Panchanan Barma and his Kshatriya Samiti re-discovered their dalit identity and joined the organised Depressed Classes movement to claim from the colonial state the same rights as had been granted to the Muslims.[30]

The endeavour of the Mahasabha did not, however, stop there, as it then tried to bridge the caste barrier by giving its ideology a reformist and pedagogic orientation and imputing more fervently a geographical meaning to the idea of being a Hindu. In April 1928 at the fourth provincial Hindu Conference in Mymensingh, the President of the meeting, Pramathanath Tarkabhushan made a passionate appeal to work against untouchability and to purify the existing untouchables by teaching them cleaner habits and purer rituals. Whoever followed a religion that was born in India, he asserted, was to be regarded as a Hindu. Hence the primary objective of the Hindu Mahasabha, as the president reiterated, would be to reclaim lost ground, through *suddhi* and the elimination of untouchability.[31] The following year, in

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[27] *'Kshatriya Samitir Panchadas Barshik Adhibesaner Bibaran'*, *Kshatriya*, Ashadh 1331 B.S.

[28] *'Kshatriya Samiti, Mahamilan Mahotsab'*, *Kshatriya*, Paush 1331 B.S.; also see, *'Bibidha prasanga: Kshatriya Milansabhar sangbad'*, *Kshatriya*, Magh 1331 B.S.

[29] *'Bibidha Prasanga: Kanpur Hindu Mahasabhay Lala Lajpat Rayer baktrita'*, *Kshatriya*, Magh 1332 B.S.

[30] For details, see Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal*.

[31] '*Sabhapati—Mahamahopadhyay Pandit Pramathanath Tarkabhushaner Abhibhashan', Pradeshik Hindu Sammilani, Chaturtha Adhibeshan, Mymensingh, 21–22 April 1928*,' Ashutosh Lahiry Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi (hereafter NMML), pp. 18, 20.

another conference, Tarkabhushan clarified his position even further, associating his reformism with an anxiety about diminishing communal power. Untouchability meant self-destruction for the Hindus, he argued. It was because of this that numerous people had crossed the boundaries of Hinduism, resulting in an appreciation of the numerical strength of the alien religious groups. Therefore, for enhancing the power of Hindu society, it was essential to unite all castes through compassion and brotherly love.[32] This was quite in tune with the policy adopted by the central organisation of the Hindu Mahasabha, which adopted resolutions in two consecutive years (1934, 1935) to promote Hindu *Sangathan, suddhi* and the uplift of the Depressed Classes. In order to facilitate this programme, efforts were also to be made to open branches (*sabhas*) in 'all the cities and towns and important villages'. And each of these *sabhas* was to hold regular meetings and employ paid preachers for propaganda work.[33]

If the Mahasabha remained a wobbly and politically indistinguishable lobby group within the Congress during its early years, it was from 1938 onward, that is, from the time of Veer Savarkar becoming its president, that it began to project its ideological distinctiveness and managed to carve out a niche for itself within the complex terrain of Indian politics.[34] It was from 1939 that the Mahasabha systematically launched its campaign for the mobilisation of the dalit peasantry in Bengal. At the Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference at Khulna on 17–18 February 1939, Savarkar himself gave this mobilisation programme a definite political agenda. The Poona Pact and the subsequent election of 1937 had in the meanwhile created a great political chasm between the Scheduled Castes and the caste Hindu population of Bengal, as the latter resented the disproportionately high number of seats reserved for the former in the Bengal Legislative Council. Referring to these grievances, Savarkar argued that it was only because of untouchability that this problem of political separatism had been created. So untouchability had to go and the dalit were to be won over and brought back into the Hindu camp through love

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[32] '*Bangiya Hindu Samaj Sammilan, Dwitiya Adhibeshan, Sabhapati Sree Pramathanath Tarkabhushan Mahashayer Abhibhashan, March 1929*', Asutosh Lahiry Papers, NMML.

[33] *Resolutions passed by the 16th Session of the Hindu Mahasabha held at Cawnpore on the 20th to 22nd April, 1935* (New Delhi: nd.), pp. 5, 9.

[34] For more details see Nandini Gondhalekar and Sanjoy Bhattacharya, 'The All India Hindu Mahasabha and the End of British Rule in India, 1939–47', *Social Scientist*, nos. 314–15, July–August 1999.

and compassion. 'It is also their country', he reasoned, 'as it is ours. But it is not the country of the Muslims.'[35] This statement left little doubt in the minds of the Mahasabha workers in Bengal as to who should be included or excluded while drawing the boundaries of the nation. The insider status of the dalit was deliberately posited against the 'Otherness' of the Muslims, and this all-encompassing Hindu identity was grounded in a territorial argument. Creation of this discursive field was indeed the genesis of Partition.

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee from this time on started touring the east Bengal countryside, where in largely attended public meetings he began to plead for 'Hindu unity and political resistance to the communal demands of the Muslims.'[36] In Namasudra populated areas like Jessore and Narail, events like an 'All Bengal Hindu Day' observed on 4 August 1940 had some success.[37] Communal tension began to rise as speeches during this period increased Hindu militancy around the demand for *Akhand Hindustan* (Undivided India), while the Muslim League propaganda 'more forcibly impressed on the minds of the Muslims' the demand for Pakistan.[38] In December 1940, the Hindu Mahasabha at its Madura conference adopted a resolution to launch an 'Immediate Programme' for the mobilisation and 'militarisation' of the Hindu race across the country.[39] In a follow-up meeting chaired by Mukherjee in Calcutta on 12 January 1941, the Madura resolutions were explained and the Pakistan scheme was condemned.[40]

However, in Bengal the immediate issue, which provided an occasion for such mobilisation, was the approaching census operations that offered an opportunity to improve the numerical position

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[35] '*Sabhapati Veer Sabharkarer Bhashan, Bangiya Pradeshik Hindu Sammelan, Khulna, 17–18 February 1939*', Asutosh Lahiry Papers, NMML.

[36] Fortnightly Confidential Report (hereafter FCR) for Dacca Division—for the 1st half of May 1940, Section IV, Government of Bengal (hereafter GB), Home (Political) Confidential File No. 30/40, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata (hereafter WBSA).

[37] FCR for Presidency Division—Period ending 12 August 1940, Part 4, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 30/40, WBSA.

[38] *Report of the Dacca Riots Enquiry Committee*, pp. 29, 53–54, Government of India (hereafter GI), Home (Political), K.W. to File No. 5/7/42-Poll(I), National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI).

[39] J. D. Malekar, Secretary, Hindu Mahasabha to Governor General of India, 8 October 1941, India Office Records, London (hereafter IOR): L/P & J/8/683.

[40] FCR for Calcutta for the first half of January, 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

of the Hindus in this Muslim majority province. The issue was taken up in earnest by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, which initially organised a series of public meetings in Calcutta in late January and early February of 1941, to urge the Hindus to be vigilant so that, in spite of the communal character of the incumbent government, their numbers were correctly enumerated in the forthcoming census.[41] Subsequently, in different parts of the province, prominent Mahasabha leaders held numerous public meetings where they explained the political significance of the census and urged people to be vigilant to ensure correct recording of the numbers of both the contending communities.[42] But as it appeared, this organised campaign was actually to inflate the number of Hindus by reclaiming some new territories and lost grounds, like the tribals and the dalit. This numerical notion of community identity, as we shall see later, was also associated with the notion of territoriality and ultimately with the conceptualisation of Partition.

Since the late 1920s, as we have seen, the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha were claiming that the Hindus were a natural birth-community of India; that is, whoever followed a religion born in India, was a Hindu. By that definition, the Santhals of north Bengal were certainly Hindus and now there was an organised campaign to instill in them a sense of belonging to the Hindu community and to mobilise them in defense of the Hindu religion. The district of Malda, from the days of Jitu Santhal, was particularly well known for such mobilisation of the tribals. Ever since then, whenever the local Hindu Mahasabha leaders wanted to put on a display of Hindu power, they brought to the Malda town a large number of Santhals, fed them generously and tried to excite in them a communal passion. The Janmastami procession in Malda in 1939 and the following session of the Provincial Hindu Mahasabha in the town, as the local Muslim MLA complained to the District Magistrate, were the two instances of such a mobilisation drive. Following a Mahasabha mass meeting in May 1940, the local Santhals overtly began to show their anti-Muslim sentiments; they gave up working in the houses of Muslims and stopped harvesting their paddy.[43]

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[41] FCR for Calcutta for the first half of February 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[42] *Ibid.*.

[43] From Z. A. Choudhuri to District Magistrate, Malda, 18 January 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 81/41, WBSA.

On 29 December 1940 there was another mass meeting organised by the local Mahasabha at Gajole *hat*, where a large number of armed Santhals assembled to listen to the Hindu leaders. The latter assured them that by drinking water from their hands, they would embrace the brave Santhals into the fold of Hindu society. 'Hindustan is the name of this country', one leader proclaimed, '… and the Hindus alone have the right to inhabit it. Only if the Muslims do agree to live here as ordinary tenants, there can be no objections. Those who are born in India and follow one of the religions of Indian growth, are all Hindus.' 'The Santals are Hindus', reiterated another speaker, 'in-as-much-as they do not celebrate Christmas nor the Id. They worship the goddess Kali'. It was therefore on these brave Santhals that rested the responsibility of defending the honour of the Hindu community, their womenfolk and their temples.[44] It was not just in Malda that this strategy of using the armed Santhals for the defence of Hinduism was being followed. A few months later in February 1941 considerable tension developed in Rajshahi over the passing of a Saraswati puja procession accompanied with music in front of the local mosque. The presence 'of about 2000 Santals in the procession with bows and arrows or lathis' was only another example of the Santhals being used in a communal display of the physical power of the Hindus.[45]

Therefore, when the census operations started in early 1941, there was a concerted attempt on the part of the Hindu Mahasabha leaders in the northern districts of Bengal to get the Santhals recorded as Hindus. The local Muslims and some of the managers in the tea garden areas tried to resist it without success, as the Santhals themselves were very excited at the prospect of being recorded as Hindus.[46] In western Bengal too, the Hindu Mahasabha carried on an 'intensive propaganda' campaign to have the religion of the Santhals recorded as Hindu. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee himself, along with other local leaders, visited the Santhal areas and delivered a series of lectures to this effect. The movement generated considerable excitement in districts like Bankura, where the local Muslim League also launched a counter-propaganda campaign and laundered money to induce the

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[44] English translation of the reported speeches delivered by the several speakers on the 29th December last at Gajol, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 81/41, WBSA.

[45] FCR for Rajshahi Division for the first half of February 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[46] FCR for Rajshahi Division for the first half of March 1941, Part II, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

Santhals to enter their religion as 'aboriginal'.[47] Such claims and counter-claims resulted in considerable amount of communal tension that spread to the non-tribal areas as well.

Intensive Hindu Mahasabha propaganda activities were reported from the Midnapur and Bankura districts in the early months of 1941, when Shyama Prasad Mukherjee spoke at several 'well-attended meetings' in both the districts.[48] The resultant communal tension spread to the nearby districts of Hooghly and Howrah.[49] Further north, in Jangipur in Murshidabad district, the Hindu Mahasabha proposed to hold a conference, and the local Muslim League a counter meeting, which led to substantial embitterment of feelings between the two communities.[50] In eastern Bengal too, similar developments were reported from Barisal,[51] Mymensingh[52] and Noakhali.[53]

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee himself visited the district of Chittagong to reorganise the local Hindu Mahasabha there and to hold public meetings.[54] As a result of this mobilisation drive, when the census operations started in the Chittagong Division, communal feelings were easily inflamed both in Chandpur town and in the countryside, as both the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha constantly traded allegations of wholesale malpractice by the census enumerators. The situation was particularly sensitive in Noakhali, where incidents were reported from the two villages of Dattapara and Raipur.[55]

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[47] Extract from Express letter No. 246C, dated the 3 March 1941, from District Magistrate, Bankura, to the Additional Secretary to GB, Home (Political) Department, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[48] FCR for Burdwan Division for the period ending 11 February 1941, Part II, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[49] *Ibid.*.

[50] FCR for Presidency Division for the period ending 27 January 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[51] *Hindu Politics: The Message of the Mahasabha: Collection of Speeches and Addresses by Sj. N. C. Chatterjee, Working President, Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha And Vice-President, All India Hindu Mahasabha* (Calcutta: 1944), pp. 1–24.

[52] J. R. Blair, Commissioner, Dacca Division to E. N. Blandy, Chief Secretary, GB, 24 March 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[53] FCR for Chittagong Division for the period ending 27 January 1941, Part II, p. 2, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[54] FCR for Chittagong Division for the period ending 10 January 1941, Part III, p. 3, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[55] FCR for Chittagong Division for the period ending 7 March 1941, Parts II & III, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

The 'main cause of the trouble', as the district officials suspected, 'was the inflammatory speeches delivered in this district… as a part of the Hindu Mahasabha campaign by Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherji...'[56] As a counter offensive, both in Noakhali and Tippera districts, the Muslim League organised a series of public meetings to protest against the Hindu Mahasabha activities and in Chandpur town (in Tippera), a *hartal* (strike) was observed on 9 March 1941.[57]

The whole agitation surrounding the census came to a head in March, when the chief minister A. K. Fazlul Huq issued a press statement condemning the Hindus for willfull manipulation and fraud, with regard to the census operations, with a view to inflating their numbers in the province. The Hindus reacted sharply and organised an all party meeting at the Calcutta Town Hall on 6 March 1941, attended by about 6000 people.[58] Here in his presidential address, Sir Nripendra Nath Sircar described the chief minister as 'a freak, an anomalous and abnormal personality' and demanded his resignation, thus 'removing a continuing menace to the peace and tranquility of the Province of Bengal'.[59] The Muslim League also retaliated by holding a counter-meeting at the same venue on 9 March 1941, where an even larger audience reaffirmed their confidence in the chief minister and expressed their conviction that the census operations had been so manipulated as to record the Muslims in very much less than their actual numbers. As the conclusion of the census operations approached, the communal situation in the province seriously deteriorated, with the rival press significantly contributing to the tension. And as a result, incidents were often deliberately given a communal colour.[60] Even in the interior villages of districts like Mymensingh, meetings were held under the auspices of the Hindu Mahasabha, where the chief minister's remarks were discussed, invariably provoking a counter blast of invective from the local Muslim League.[61]

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[56] FCR for Bengal for the second half of March 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[57] FCR for Chittagong Division for the period ending 23 March 1941, Part II, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[58] FCR for Calcutta for the first half of March 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[59] Speech by Sir Nripendra Nath Sircar at the Calcutta Town Hall Meeting of the Hindu Citizens, 6 March 1941, pp. 7–8.

[60] FCR for Bengal for the first half of March 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[61] S. K. Ghosh to J. R. Blair, Commissioner, Dacca Division, 19 March 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

It needs to be mentioned here that one of the major aims of this elaborate Hindu propaganda campaign was to induce the dalit to record themselves as just 'Hindus'. This would surely inflate the number of the Hindus in Bengal, vis-à-vis the Muslims, and would certainly revise the political arithmetic in this province. But the dalit population, unlike the Santhals, was not as yet very enthusiastic in their response to such appeals. This becomes evident from the protest launched by the Burdwan Scheduled Caste Association against the prospect of their community being 'sadly reduced in numbers' in the forthcoming census.[62] Another 'large Scheduled Caste conference' at Jhalakati in Dacca district on 19–20 April 1941 also resented the fact that their community 'had been cheated at the census by Hindu enumerators' who recorded them as just 'Hindu', instead of 'Namasudra', in the census slips. As the District Magistrate of Dacca reported, there was unmistakable 'evidence of division of opinion in the community' on this issue.[63] Although many of the leaders of their caste organisations had started moving towards greater identification with the Hindu community at this stage, there was not as yet a consensus on this matter.[64]

The census operations of 1941 eventually came to an end and the report that was published subsequently did not significantly alter the numerical position of the Hindus in the province. But the agitation set the Hindu Mahasabha programme of mass mobilisation into gear. A few months later the open session of the All India Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha was held in Calcutta on 14–15 June 1941, where this programme was given a definite ideological orientation. One of the resolutions stated clearly that the Pakistan campaign already launched by the Muslim League had made 'it imperative that Hindu Sangathanists throughout India should organise themselves on a national scale … to defend their hearths, homes, temples … and above all, Hindu honour'. The question of caste distinction and discrimination must not stand in the way, and so another resolution

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[62] FCR for Burdwan Division for the period ending 11 March 1941, Part II, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[63] FCR for Dacca Division for the first half of May 1941, Section II, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[64] For more details on this shift in dalit politics in Bengal during this period, see my earlier article, 'From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal, 1937–47'. Joya Chatterji, however, thinks that 'more usually the lower castes … gratefully accepted the "Hindu" identity which was being offered to them.' See her *Bengal Divided*, p. 198.

vigorously emphasised the need to ensure 'solidarity and consolidation of all classes of Hindus by adopting a social programme which will remove all artificial barriers and will rouse spontaneous pan-Hindu consciousness among them.' Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in his speech also made a 'fervent appeal for Hindu consolidation' and emphasised the 'urgent necessity of organising volunteer corps'. And on the second day, Veer Savarkar in his address before 2000 students of Hindu College explained the necessity of 'Hindu Militarisation', the need to revitalise the martial spirit that once existed among the Hindus, but was destroyed by the British policy of demilitarisation and Gandhi's creed of non-violence.[65] The Hindu mobilisation campaign was thus infused with a definite militant mood.

However, as the existing evidence suggests, even before this official announcement the programme for the militarisation of the Hindus had already been set on foot in the Bengal countryside. In March 1941 two largely attended meetings in Faridpur were reported as being held under the auspices of the Bharat Sevashram Sangha, which had been trying to raise in this locality a *Rakshi Dal* or defence volunteer corps. With this mission in mind, the local youth were given training in the use of the lathi and dagger by the instructors from the Madaripur Jugantar Party, which had close contacts with the local dalit leaders. They organised several meetings that were attended by the local Namasudras, numbering up to 2000 on each occasion. A few months later, in several Namasudra villages in this district, the local youths were openly practicing the use of the lathi, which made their Muslim neighbours apprehensive.[66]

The Hindu Mahasabha leaders themselves also tried to organise meetings, specifically targeting the dalit social groups, in places like Madhabpur in Jessore district,[67] in Rangpur,[68] in Lalbagh and Kandi in Murshidabad district and in Barisal. Around the same time reports were received that the Hindu Mahasabha was trying to open branches in every union in Boda police station in Jalpaiguri district, where they

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[65] FCR for Calcutta for the second half of June 1941, Part II; 'Miscellaneous: 17 June 1941', appended to FCR for Bengal for the second half of June 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[66] FCR for Dacca Division for the first and second half of March 1941; for the second half of May 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[67] FCR for Presidency Division for the period ending 10 April 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[68] Telegram to Collector of Rangpur, 8 April 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 142/41, WBSA.

wanted to raise a 'defence volunteer corps'. In Malda too the local Mahasabha leaders tried to incite communal tension. And branches were opened in industrial areas like Asansol, where the members of the working classes could be roped into this scheme of Hindu militarisation.[69] But it was in Dinajpur in north Bengal that the movement acquired a lot of excitement and tension, as the local Mahasabha unit took up the Hindu case against an executive order banning Hindu immersion processions with music passing near the mosques.[70] The movement reached its height at the time of the Durga puja festivities in September–October, when the local Mahasabha leaders announced their plan of mobilising the Santhals, armed with their conventional weapons, in such processions and spent money to provide bows and arrows for the Santhals of Bogra. A series of protest meetings were held in the district, the *Bejoya* immersion ceremony was abandoned and a *hartal* was observed in protest.[71] Similar *hartals* were also organised by the Hindu Mahasabha in Comilla, Chandpur and Brahmanbaria in Tippera district, in the mining town of Kulti in Burdwan, and in Calcutta, where protest meetings were also held.[72]

It was no wonder, therefore, that Veer Savarkar in a press statement on 7 October 1941 expressed his satisfaction at the fact that 'the Hindu Militarisation movement…[was] carried on effectively by the Hindu-Sangathanists throughout India.'[73] He arrived in Calcutta in November on his way to Assam, and in two largely attended meetings 'expressed satisfaction at the growing Hindu solidarity' in the province. One of the key features of the movement, as B. S. Munje had clarified in an earlier meeting in Burrabazar, was 'to combat

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[69] FCR for Presidency Division for the period ending 26 April 1941, Part II; FCR for Dacca Division for second half of June 1941; FCR for Rajshahi Division for the second half of June 1941; FCR for Rajshahi Division for the second half of July 1941, Section II; FCR for Burdwan Division for the period ending 26 August 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[70] FCR for Rajshahi Division for the second half of July 1941, Section II, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[71] FCR for Bengal for the second half of September and first half of October 1941; FCR for Rajshahi Division for the first half of October 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[72] FCR for Tippera for the second half of October 1941; FCR for Burdwan Division for the fortnight ending 9 October 1941; FCR for Calcutta for the first half of October 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[73] J. D. Malekar, Secretary, Hindu Mahasabha, to Governor-General of India, 8 October 1941, IOR, L/P & J/8/683.

untouchability and the proselytisation of the Hindus.' This was further reiterated at the tenth session of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha held at Burdwan on 29–30 November 1941.[74] On the second day of the conference, at a gathering of Hindu students, N. C. Chatterjee implored them to 'mitigate the stubbornness of the caste system' and to 'elevate the so-called depressed classes'. The time had come, he declared, when they 'should consider whether the Hindus ought to proselytise.' They 'should reclaim', he suggested, 'those who want[ed] re-entry into the Hindu fold or welcome those who want[ed] to establish allegiance to Hinduism by cultural or spiritual affinity.'[75] The formation of the Progressive Coalition ministry, popularly known as the Shyama-Huq ministry, in December 1941 with the support of the majority of the Scheduled Caste legislators, brought these social groups closer to the Hindu Mahasabha and made it easier for them to construct an extended Hindu political community in Bengal.

Although the Quit India Movement in 1942 and the famine in 1943 interrupted this mobilisation campaign temporarily, the Mahasabha leaders never completely abandoned it. In his presidential address at the North Bengal Hindu conference on 14 March 1942, N. C. Chatterjee, reiterated that 'True nationalism in India has been primarily a Hindu concept.' And that 'India is one and indivisible'.[76] The following year in December at the All India Hindu Students' Conference at Amritsar, the message of Hindu solidarity that this Mahasabha leader from Bengal offered was more clear and emphatic. 'Remember the future of the Akhand Hindusthan', he said, 'will depend on the success of Sangathan. Do not divide, do not alienate, bridge all gulfs.' The imperfections of Hindu society, like untouchability, he argued, were 'not due to Hinduism, but due to the lapses of Hinduism.' So the Hindu youth should work for the elimination of untouchability, the uplift of the backward and Depressed Classes, so that they were not 'exploited by the enemies of Hindudom.'[77]

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[74] FCR for Calcutta for the first half of October 1941and second half of November 1941; FCR for Burdwan Division for the period ending 10 December 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[75] *Hindu Politics: The Message of the Mahasabha: Collection of Speeches & Addresses by Sj. N. C. Chatterjee*, pp. 80–81.

[76] North Bengal Hindu Conference: Presidential Address delivered by Sj. N. C. Chatterjee, Chatmohar, Pabna, 14 March 1942, pp. 4–8.

[77] All India Hindu Students' Conference, Second Session, Presidential Address by Sj. N. C. Chatterjee, Amritsar, 28 December 1943, pp. 2, 11–13.

This policy of mobilising the untouchables was, however, spelt out more clearly by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in his presidential address delivered at the 26th session of the All India Hindu Mahasabha on 24 December 1944:

> Our first and foremost social programme must therefore be the complete *removal of untouchability* and to regard *every Hindu as enjoying equal social status*.... Not only must we widen our base but also unhesitatingly take back all who are prepared to return to our fold.... Our aim should be to create a network of vigorous centres, one in each sub-division at least, and later on for every group of villages...[where] the threefold task of spreading the true teachings of Hindu *dharma*,...*removing untouchability* and *imparting physical culture* will be actively carried on.[78]

In the course of the previous five years the Mahasabha had in fact built up in Bengal an intricate network of rural branches in areas which had a considerable concentration of the dalit.[79] In addition, the Rashtriya Sayam Sevak Sangh had its supporters in Calcutta, Mymensingh, Malda, Rajshahi, Pabna, Nabadwip, Howrah and Berhampore. It already had small branches in Calcutta, Mymensingh and Malda and was trying to open branches in other areas too.[80] We do not, however, know whether or not it too had the same agenda of mobilising the marginal members of Hindu society.

Throughout this period, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was in close contact with local dalit leaders like Krishnapada Samaddar, whose mission was 'to remove the separationist [sic] mentality from the Scheduled Caste people.' Such people were being 'made to feel that they...[were an] integral part of the Hindu society. Before all else they...[were] Hindus.' In western Bengal the Paundra–Kshatriya MLA, Patiram Ray was acting as a link between Mukherjee and such local leaders as Samaddar.[81] In eastern Bengal, Upendranath Edbar, the Scheduled Caste MLA from Bakarganj, was receiving regular funds from the Hindu Mahasabha 'to organise the Scheduled Caste people'.[82]

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[78] The 26th Session of All India Hindu Mahasabha, Presidential Address by Shyamaprasad Mukherjee, 24 December 1944, p. 16, Asutosh Lahiry Papers, NMML, italics in the original.

[79] Hindu Mahasabha Papers, File No. P-32, 1944, NMML.

[80] Note from DIG, IB, dated 21 January 1944, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 21/44, WBSA.

[81] Shyama Prasad Mukherjee to Krishnapada Samaddar, 7 December 1944, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Papers, II–IV Instalment, Subject File No. 90, NMML.

[82] Shyama Prasad Mukherjee to U. N. Edbar, 13 October 1944, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Papers, II–IV Instalment, Subject File No. 90, NMML.

In gatherings of such people he was explaining 'the dire necessity of the Hindu Sangathan among the Hindus.' And his views, as reported back by him to the President of the Mahasabha, were being 'highly appreciated' by such gatherings.[83] At a Hindu Mahasabha Conference at Barisal in 1944, the resolution against Partition was moved by Edbar himself and was 'supported by well known leaders belonging to the Scheduled Caste'. This conference demonstrated, as N. C. Chatterjee later boasted in his address to another conference, 'the closer identification of the so-called Scheduled Castes with the Mahasabha movement.'[84] At this stage, apart from such individuals, even the erstwhile radical caste-centred organisations, like the Dacca Namasudra Samiti, also appeared to have become eager to maintain friendly relations with Mukherjee.[85] The Hindu Mahasabha, in other words, was thus gradually inching towards its goal of constructing an expanded Hindu political community, which would include the dalit and the *adivasis*, and would be positioned against its projected 'Other', the Muslims.

III

The impact of such organised efforts to articulate a Hindu identity among the dalit of Bengal could be very easily seen in the communal riots that broke out during this period between them and the Muslims. There had been a series of riots between the two communities in the past; but those were of a more 'secular' nature. There had been communal frenzy centering on land disputes, on women or for the honour of the community—rarely, however, was there any overt use of religious idioms. And simultaneous with confrontation, there was co-operation as well. But the situation began to change in the 1940s, as the Namasudras, the most articulate group among the dalit, arguably due to the influence of the Hindu Mahasabha, now began to confront the Muslims not simply as Namasudras, as they did previously, but as Hindus as well.[86]

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[83] Upendra Nath Edbar to S. P. Mukherjee, 2 October 1944, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Papers, II–IV Instalment, Subject File No. 90, NMML.

[84] N. C. Chatterjee, Presidential Address, Moorshidabad District Hindu Conference, 27 November 1944, p. 9.

[85] Mohan Lal Mandal, President, Dacca Namasudra Samity, to Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, 29 June 1946, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Papers, II–IV Instalment, Correspondence, Serial No. 849, NMML.

[86] A detailed discussion on the changing Namasudra–Muslim relations during this

After the election of 1937 when the leaders of the Namasudra and Muslim communities were coming to a political adjustment and the first coalition ministry under Fazlul Huq had started functioning smoothly, their followers in the east Bengal countryside got involved in a series of violent riots in Faridpur, Mymensingh and Jessore between February and April 1938. Though rioting had been entirely due to local ill-feeling between the peasants of the two communities over such issues as disputes over cattle or demarcation of land, the Hindu Mahasabha decided to take up these issues and make them items of a wider propaganda campaign. In an organised way rumours were spread, particularly in Jessore, that temples had been desecrated and images broken and an Assistant Secretary of the organisation was sent to the troubled area to conduct an inquiry on the spot.[87] Communal passions were thus stirred up in the course of a conflict, which initially had nothing to do with religion.

During the subsequent years the relationship between the two communities continued to be tense particularly in Faridpur and Jessore–Khulna districts. These were the regions where the two communities were often involved in violent friction in the past and the causes of the recent conflicts also remained the same. But some changes in their collective mentalities were also visible at the same time. This was the period when we witness what a well known historian of communal riots in Bengal has called 'the transition to a new phase' which ultimately led to 'the convergence of elite and popular communalism'.[88] And one of the major reasons for this shift, as we have seen earlier, was certainly the organised mass mobilisation campaign set on foot by the Hindu Mahasabha since about 1940. The most authentic representation of the new mood was perhaps the Dacca riot of 18–21 March 1941. The dalit of eastern Bengal could hardly remain unaffected by this new high pitched tenor of politicised communalism. An interesting fact about the Dacca riot, which has never been mentioned thus far, is that the local dalit were equally involved in and affected by it. Of the refugees who fled from Dacca in the wake of the riot and took shelter in Agartala, a great majority

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period may be found in S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*. Some relevant information from this book is being reproduced here. So in the subsequent paragraphs of this section, all information, if not otherwise mentioned in a footnote, is from this book.

[87] The Associated Press of India, 1 May 1938, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 248/38, WBSA.

[88] S. Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905–1947*, chapters 5–6.

of them were dalit. The Hindu Mahasabha undertook relief work among them and taking advantage of the situation the dalit induced the caste Hindus to accept water from their hands and to refrain from treating them as untouchables any more.[89]

Almost simultaneous with the Dacca riot, at a short distance away another riot took place in Khulna on 14 March 1941. It was apparently sparked off by a dispute between a Namasudra creditor and a Muslim debtor, which almost immediately led to the mobilisation of large crowds on both sides from the adjoining villages of Gangachana and Kalatala in the Mollahat police station. Almost all the Namasudra houses in the former and all the Muslim houses in the latter village were burnt to ashes, and the tension spread to other areas in Mollahat and to the nearby police station of Tarakhada as well. Elaborate precautionary measures were taken to prevent the tension from spreading to the adjacent Namasudra dominated areas of Gopalganj in Faridpur district. But the Dacca riots a few days later rekindled the fire and the situation in certain Namasudra populated areas like Patuakhali or Bhola in Bakarganj, Mollahat in Khulna and Narail subdivision in Jessore became explosive. In the latter area, a few days later a peace meeting was held in Kalaberia in Kalia police station. About 1500 people attended and they elected a committee, consisting of both Namasudras and Muslims, to ensure peace in the area and to maintain cordial relations between the two communities.[90] In other areas, it took longer for the tension to subside.

The following year of 1942 passed off rather peacefully, as far as communal violence was concerned, as the attention of the entire nation was focused on the Quit India Movement. But during this period, the Mahasabha attempts to Hinduise the social identity of the dalit did not cease. As a result, in 1943–44, the number of local branches of the Mahasabha in Bengal rose to 1217, from 1004 in the previous year, while the number of new members enrolled rose to 40,887 as against 15,474 in the previous year. There is valid reason

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[89] FCR for Chittagong Division for the period ending 24 April 1941, Part II and the 'Extract from the weekly confidential report of the S.P., Tippera, for the week ending 19 April 1941', appended to *ibid.*, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

[90] FCR for Bengal for the second half of March 1941; FCR for Presidency Division for the period ending 27 March 1941, Part III and for the period ending 26 April 1941, Part III; FCR for Dacca Division for second half of March 1941, Section III; FCR for Bengal for first half of April 1941, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, WBSA.

to presume that many of these new members belonged to dalit communities, as some of the sub-divisional branches, which enrolled more than 1000 new members in that year, were located in areas predominantly populated by such classes. And apart from that, the annual report of the Mahasabha for that year prominently publicised not only the cases of *suddhi* carried out by these local branches but also the news of Namasudra–Muslim riots in Khulna.[91] The local Mahasabha leaders, in other words, continued to make use of whatever issue they could find to destabilise the relationship between the dalit and the Muslim peasants.[92] It was not surprising that in June 1944 the Namasudra and Muslim mobs in Bagerhat in the district of Khulna were openly confronting each other with such overtly politicised communal slogans as '*Hindu Sakti Ki Jay*' (Victory to Hindu Power), '*Shyama Prasad Jindabad*' [Long Live Shyama Prasad] and, on the other hand, '*Muslim Sakti Ki Jay* (Victory to Muslim Power) and *Shyama Prasad Dhansa Houk*' [Let Shyama Prasad be Destroyed]. The local officers in Khulna had good reason to believe that this ill feeling between the two communities in the area had been 'instigated by the organisers of the Hindu Mahasabha'.[93]

This incident is certainly indicative of a new feature of Namasudra–Muslim relations in this area, where local friction over agrarian disputes was being fast tagged on to the wider political conflict between the two religious communities. As it was evident from their vindication of Hindu power, the identification of the common Namasudra villagers with the Hindu community in this region was perhaps no longer a distant dream for the Hindu Mahasabha. By contrast, the other dalit groups, like the Rajbansis of north Bengal remained relatively less involved in communal troubles, but certainly not untouched by Hindu communal sentiments. In the early 1920s, as we have already mentioned in the previous chapter, the icon of '*Dangdhori Mao*' or the club-wielding mother, had become the rallying symbol for Rajbansi communal mobilisation, ostensibly to protect the

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[91] Annual Report of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha for 1943–44, pp. 2–3, 14–15, 22.

[92] A detailed account of how during these years the Hindu Mahasabha was trying to Hinduise dalit identity in eastern Bengal may be found in S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 217–28.

[93] Report by the Commissioner, Presidency Division, on allegations against the conduct of the police and local officers in connection with the communal riots in Mollahat P. S. on 26 May 1944 and subsequently, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 272/44, WBSA.

honour of their women against imagined Muslim threats.[94] The Rajbansis at this stage were influenced by the dominant Hindu communal discourse, in which women appeared to symbolise the honour of the community and the Muslims were portrayed as ever prepared to violate Hindu women in order to trample over this communal honour.[95] These emotions, which had been whipped up by a caste leadership desperately trying to close the internal social gaps within the community, subsided in the 1930s following the rupture in their relationship with the Hindu Mahasabha and their joining the Depressed Classes movement that provided a different cementing ideology. But the communal suspicions that these sentiments generated lingered on, and as late as 1946, during the Tebhaga movement, this mutual mistrust often tore apart the class solidarity between the Rajbansi and Muslim sharecroppers.[96]

The Hindu–Muslim communal divide was thus no longer just a high caste elite affair in the 1940s. This was largely because of the propaganda campaign of the Hindu Mahasabha, which continued uninterrupted throughout the period. In Hindu meetings around this time at places like Faridpur, which had significant dalit population, speakers mentioned 'Hindu *Sangathan*' and 'fulfilling the demands of the Depressed Classes' almost in one breath.[97] Such meetings organised by the Hindu Mahasabha were reported from almost every part of Bengal in the early months of 1945.[98] A more formal meeting, of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Conference took place in Jalpaiguri town on 24–25 February 1945. It was addressed by B. S. Munje and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, and was attended by 6000 delegates from all over the province. One of the political resolutions

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[94] Upendranath Barman, *Thakur Panchanan Barmar Jibancharit* (Jalpaiguri: 1387 B.S.), pp. 47–57.

[95] For details, see Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal*.

[96] Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal 1930–1950* (Calcutta: 1988), p. 252.

[97] *Anandabazar Patrika*, 9 January 1945.

[98] Such as, Kadambari in Faridpur, Meher Kalibari in Tippera, in Burdwan, Bankura and Nadia districts, in Budge Budge in 24-Parganas, in Birbhum, in Jiagunj in Murshidabad district, etc. See, FCR for Burdwan Division for the second half of January and the second half of February 1945, Part II; FCR for Chittagong Division for the second half of January 1945, Part II; A typed draft FCR for Bengal for the second half of January 1945; FCR for Bengal for the second half of February and first half of March 1945; FCR for Presidency Division for the second half of February 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

adopted at this conference, as in some other meetings around this time, was for the recognition of *Akhand Hindusthan* and the need for militarisation of the Hindu race. This was followed by the observance of an 'Independence Day' on 10 May 1945 under the auspices of the Mahasabha, which, however, failed to attract the attention of the dalit in the province.[99]

But this certainly did not mean that dalit support for the Hindu Mahasabha was waning. There was now a serious division in dalit political opinion on the issue of integration, as opposed to separation of the Scheduled Castes advocated by Dr B. R. Ambedkar around this time. This schism was quite evident in places like Faridpur, where in January 1945, a Scheduled Caste Conference was convened which was to be addressed by the leaders of the Bengal Namasudra Association, Mukunda Behari and Pulin Behari Mullick, who were brothers. But it could not be held due to the active opposition of the Ambedkarite Scheduled Caste Federation led by Jogendranath Mandal. The district authorities apprehended trouble, although ultimately no disturbances occurred.[100] Then in April 1945, the latter group convened their own conference at Gopalganj, which also had to be postponed, as the Association led by the Mullick brothers now opposed it. It is interesting to note here, that the Mullick brothers, who were opposing the Ambedkar group of dalit politicians at this stage, were allegedly being 'supported by the Hindu Mahasabha'.[101] Such anti-Ambedkar dalit in villages like Jhalakati and Pirojpur in the neighbouring district of Bakarganj were openly participating in Hindu Mahasabha meetings, addressed by such stalwarts from Calcutta, as Shyama Prasad Mukherjee or D. N. Mukherjee (the then Mayor of Calcutta).[102]

The dalit of Bakarganj district also demonstrated a Hindu militant mood, and in the Bhil (another tribal community) areas frequent

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[99] FCR for Bengal for the second half of February 1945; FCR for Rajshahi Division for the first half of March 1945; FCR for Presidency Division for the second half of April and second half of May 1945; FCR for Burdwan Division for the second half of May 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

[100] FCR for Dacca Division for the first half of January 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

[101] FCR for Dacca Division for the first half of April 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA. In an earlier article, I had mistakenly described the Mullick brothers as the 'supporters of the conference'. I wish to rectify this mistake here. See S. Bandyopadhyay, 'From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal, 1937–47', p. 372.

[102] FCR for Dacca Division for the second half of June 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

troubles were reported between the local Namasudras and Muslims.[103] But the most provocative display of Hindu power took place in April 1945 at Mithapur *hat* in Lohagara police station in Jessore, where some Namasudras, carrying an image of the goddess Kali, purposely sang and danced before a mosque during prayer hours. The Muslims asked them to go away, which they did. But the following day about 4000 Namasudras returned, armed this time with *dhal* and *sarki*, and sang before the mosque to provoke the Muslims. Nothing happened, as the 'Muslims were not prepared and ready'. But they now started organising themselves by mobilising their co-religionists from nearby villages, so that they could teach the Namasudras a lesson the next time they came back. The impending trouble was only averted by the timely intervention of the local *thana* (police station) officer.[104] In the same way in north Bengal in January 1945, the local police prevented trouble between the Santhals and the Muslims in Lalbagh in Dinajpur district, over the former leading a Kali puja procession during the prayer hours of the Muslims.[105] A few months later in April, trouble broke out again between these two communities in the Barind areas of neighbouring Rajshahi district over the alleged abduction of a Santhal girl by a Muslim man. Several houses were burnt down and one person was killed, and the incident had serious repercussions on the relations between the two communities in adjacent Malda district. Although the situation in Rajshahi was soon brought under control, the tensions in Malda continued for some time. There is a strong probability that the Hindu Mahasabha was actively involved here, as two months later in a Legislative Assembly by-election in this district they were assiduously trying to put forward a Santhal candidate, who, however, declined to stand.[106]

As the foregoing developments indicate, by the middle of 1945 the Hinduisation of the dalit in Bengal had made considerable progress. Indian politics too had taken long strides towards its ultimate destiny. In June, the attention of the Mahasabha shifted to the Wavell Plan

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[103] FCR for Dacca Division for the first half of April 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

[104] FCR for Presidency Division for the second half of April 1945, Section III, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

[105] FCR for Rajshahi Division for the second half of January 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

[106] FCR for Bengal for the first and second half of April 1945; FCR for Rajshahi Division for the second half of June 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

and the Shimla Conference convened by the Viceroy to work out the future constitutional arrangement for India. The Mahasabha had two main grievances against the proposals: first, against their being excluded from this conference and, second, about the Scheduled Castes being regarded as a separate community for the purposes of representation. To protest against the Wavell Plan, it held several meetings both at Calcutta and in the interior regions as far as Narayanganj, Dacca and Mymensingh. But since all other parties wanted to give it a go, the Hindu Mahasabha 'protest' week evoked little public response and the *hartal* called on 8 July 1945 ended in failure.[107] But the Shimla Conference could not ultimately untie the constitutional tangle for India, and within a few months it became a non-issue, as the political atmosphere was caught up by the mounting enthusiasm and political campaigns for the coming elections.

As far as the Scheduled Castes' reserved constituencies were concerned, the Bengal Congress almost swept the election of 1945–46, capturing 24 out of 30 reserved seats. The number rose to 26, as two independent Scheduled Caste MLAs later switched their allegiance to the Congress. This spectacular Congress victory at the expense of the Mahasabha, which was also vying for this constituency, was due to various reasons. First, in a comparative sense, the Congress had been much more active in cultivating the friendship of the dalit leaders, as the compulsions of political arithmetic made its leadership rethink its policy towards the dalit since the election of 1937.[108] Second, the Mahasabha had been rather late in launching its election campaign and even then, by organising joint meetings with the Congress in different localities, it allowed the latter to hijack the campaign to its own advantage. And finally, the immobilisation due to serious illness of its President, Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the only popular figure on its platform, just before the elections further diminished its chances.[109]

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[107] FCR for Bengal for the second half of June 1945; Appendix I. Press Adviser's appreciation for the second half of June 1945; FCR for Dacca Division for the second half of July 1945; FCR for Bengal for the first half of July 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

[108] I have discussed Congress policies towards the Scheduled Castes in greater detail in S. Bandyopadhyay, 'From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal, 1937–47'.

[109] FCR for Chittagong Division for the first half of September 1945, Part II; FCR for Presidency Division for the first half of October 1945, Part II, second half of October 1945, Part II; FCR for Burdwan Division for the first half of September 1945, Part II, first half of October 1945, Part II, and first half of November 1945,

We have to remember, however, that although the Mahasabha had fielded its own candidates against Congress nominees in 26 general seats, the victory of the one did not marginalise the other. The two organisations at this stage jointly represented the emerging constituency of the Bengali Hindus, which included the dalit, and the *adivasis* were not excluded either.[110] However, this did not necessarily mean a changing attitude of the Bengali Hindu society towards its dalit members. This was quite evident in an unreserved seat in Bakarganj district, where in the 1937 election the dalit leader Jogendranath Mandal had defeated a Kayastha Congress candidate. But this time, neither he nor any other dalit leader had any chance of success, as caste Hindus in this constituency had registered themselves as voters in large numbers, sometimes furnishing false educational certificates or misrepresenting their age, so that the fiasco of the last election was not repeated again.[111]

In the new Bengal Assembly, the Muslim League emerged as the largest party and the new cabinet under H. S. Suhrawardy included a dalit minister, Jogendranath Mandal, the only representative of Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation in the new elected legislature. Mandal at this stage was certainly representing a minority position within dalit politics in Bengal, as most of its other leaders had aligned themselves with the Congress–Mahasabha combine and had embraced a militant Hindu identity. He was even further marginalised during the Calcutta riots of August 1946, as he remained the only Hindu member in a Muslim cabinet. Although three Scheduled Caste Congress MLAs defected at this stage,[112] the majority of the dalit in Bengal were on the Hindu side of the communal divide. An 'Open Letter' in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reminded Jogendranath Mandal that '[t]he fate of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal goes along with that of the Caste Hindus in a riot and they have suffered no less than the Caste Hindus…'[113] Another letter to the editor a few days later boldly announced that '[t]he Scheduled Castes are Hindus first and Hindus

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Part I; FCR for Rajshahi Division for the first half of October 1945, Part II; FCR for Bengal for the second half of November 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

[110] This point has been discussed at length by Joya Chatterji in her *Bengal Divided*, pp. 227–30.

[111] FCR for Dacca Division for the first half of October 1945; also FCR for Bakarganj District for the period ending 22 October 1945, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, WBSA.

[112] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 September 1946.

[113] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 September 1946.

last…' and there was no question of their joining hands with the Muslims.'[114]

In the wake of the Calcutta riot, communal tension spread to other parts of the province, which, as a government report described it, 'was on the verge of a civil war.' The Hindu leaders, with direct encouragement from the Bengal Congress, tried to organise the Hindu youth for the purposes of self-defence; and the Hindu Mahasabha proposed to recruit and train a 'Hindustan National Guard', with each of its battalions stationed at every headquarter of the eastern Bengal districts.[115] It needs to be mentioned here that this Hindu mobilisation drive was not meant exclusively for the *bhadralok*, but definitely targeted at the working classes as well. And the dalit became deeply involved in the fracas, however much Jogendranath Mandal might have tried to dissuade them. When rioting spread to Howrah, it was mainly 'confined to the labouring classes'.[116] And in the Noakhali disturbances the dalit were some of the major victims.[117] After an 'aerial tour of the affected areas', Jogendranath Mandal made a press statement that it was merely 'the activities of the Goonda elements', and that no political parties were involved.[118] But the fact that a few days later, P. N. Rajbhoj, the Secretary of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation, was brought to Bengal and was taken to the riot affected areas in Tippera entirely at the government's expense, speaks of a different scenario.[119]

More indications to the contrary could be found in the Gopalganj sub-division of Faridpur district, where in late November 1946 the attempts by Mandal's supporters 'to bring about an alliance between the Namasudras and Muslims', were vigorously opposed by the followers of P. R. Thakur, a Congress supported Namasudra MLA and now a member of the Constituent Assembly. This contest between 'the

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[114] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 September 1946.

[115] FCR for Bengal for the second half of October and the first half of November 1946, IOR: L/P & J/5/153.

[116] S. Banerjee, Commissioner, Burdwan Division, to E. E. McInerney, Special Officer, GB, Home Dept., 9 October 1946, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 398/46 (Part), WBSA.

[117] Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 202.

[118] 'Mr J. N. Mandal on Communal Outbreak in East Bengal', Telegram A. 3602 from the Press Information Bureau, New Delhi, 25 October 1946, IOR, L/P & J/8/578.

[119] From Private Secretary to Chief Minister, to Director of Transportation, Civil Supplies Dept., GB, 13 November 1946, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 185/47, WBSA.

Scheduled Caste Federationists (allied to the Muslim League) and the Scheduled Caste Nationalists (allied to the Congress)' reached such an 'inflammable state' in the early days of December that to keep it under control a military detachment from Dacca had to carry on a series of flag marches, a wireless station had to be installed and daily aerial reconnaissance needed to be arranged.[120] A few months later in Tippera in February 1947, when Gandhi organised a prayer meeting at Char Krishnapur, in the wake of communal violence in the area, the participants included '[a]bout 4000 Namasudras including a large number women and children …'.[121] In April, P. R. Thakur spoke at a series of meetings in Jessore district, where the Namasudras came to hear him in the thousands. In one such meeting, attended by 'some 10,000' Namasudras, Thakur was greeted with a *tilak* of blood on his forehead, an emotional gesture that inevitably symbolised the new militant mood of the local dalit. In May, continuing strained relations between the Bihari Muslim refugees and the local dalit Hindus were reported from Salbani in Midnapur district.[122] In the following months, communal tension spread to industrial areas of Ranigunj, Lilooah and Kharagpur, involving many non-Bengali dalit workers in these localities.[123] What all this evidence irrefutably indicates is that, by now communal mobilisation in Bengal was no longer just a *bhadralok* affair and had beyond doubt engulfed dalit identity.

IV

The main issue around which the Hindu–Muslim, communal–political polarisation was taking place in Bengal was the Muslim League's Pakistan demand. As far as the dalit were concerned, in March 1946 at a meeting at Agra, Ambedkar had announced his support for the League demand: 'Muslims are fighting for their legitimate rights and

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[120] FCR for Bengal for the second half of November and first half of December 1946, IOR: L/P & J/5/153.

[121] *The Pioneer*, 25 February 1947.

[122] FCR for Bengal for the first half of April and second half of May 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[123] From Additional Superintendent of Police, Asansol, to Police Dept., GB, 10 May 1947, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 235/47; Copy of Report dated 28 July 1947, from Superintendent, Government Railway Police, Howrah, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 325/47; Report on Kharagpur situation dated 10 August 1947…by Superintendent of Police, Midnapore, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 212/47, WBSA.

they are bound to achieve Pakistan.'[124] About a month later, in a press interview he justified his own demand for separate villages for the dalit. This would not amount, he thought, to an encroachment on the rights of any other party. There were large areas of cultivable wasteland lying untenanted in the country, which could be set aside for the settlement of the dalit.[125] The echoes of this demand could be heard from distant places. In the Central Provinces some of the dalit started talking vaguely about a 'Dalitsthan';[126] In northern Bengal a few Rajbansis, supported by the Scheduled Caste Federation leader Jogendranath Mandal, raised the demand for 'Rajasthan' or a separate Rajbansi Kshatriya homeland.[127] In another meeting at Aguljhara in Bakarganj district in the east, a large gathering of about 10,000 dalit mobilised by the local branch of the Scheduled Caste Federation on 1 June 1947, demanded that if integration of India was impeded at all, they must have an 'Achchhutsthan' or a separate homeland for the untouchables.[128] But barring such isolated demands, the majority of the dalit in Bengal seemed to be exactly on the opposite pole. Their responses to the Partition issue clearly demonstrated that they had completely identified themselves with Hindu sentiments and apprehensions on the matter.

As far as the Hindu Mahasabha is concerned, it is simplistic to argue that it was, along with the Bengal Congress, responsible for the Partition of Bengal. Initially it was committed to opposing any partition of *Akhand Hindustan*, as Mukherjee and Bhopatkar made it clear in their deposition before the Cabinet Mission on 15 April 1946. The 'integrity and indivisibility of the country', they demanded, 'must be maintained at any cost. Partition would be economically unsound and disastrous, and politically unwise and suicidal.'[129] But then, within the next few months their position changed, as the outbreak of communal

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[124] 'News from India: Political Situation', 18 March 1946, GI, Home (Political), File No. 51/2/46-Poll(I), NAI.

[125] 'News from India: Political Situation', 2 May 1946, GI, Home (Political), File No. 51/2/46-Poll(I), NAI.

[126] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 September 1946.

[127] Ranajit Das Gupta, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869–1947* (New Delhi: 1992), p. 238.

[128] From Bipin Chandra Haldar, Secretary, Goila Union Scheduled Caste Federation Party, to Governor General of India, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part IV, NAI.

[129] Note of meeting between Sir Stafford Cripps and Mr A. V. Alexander, and the representatives of the Hindu Mahasabha, Dr S. P. Mukherji and Mr L. B. Bhopatkar, at 4.30 pm. on Monday, 15 April 1946, IOR: L/P & J/10/51.

violence, the subsequent British cabinet decision and the Congress resolution of 8 March 1947 made it clear that the creation of Pakistan was a historical certainty and that in all probability, it would incorporate the whole of Bengal. Therefore, haunted by the possibility of being permanently subjected to a majority Muslim rule in Pakistan, the Mahasabha in a last ditch desperate attempt now focused on creating a homeland for the Bengali Hindus by retaining the predominantly Hindu majority areas of Bengal within the Indian Union.[130] Becoming a perpetually subjugated minority in Pakistan or identifying with the hegemonic Hindu majority in India—the choice for the Bengali Hindus at this historical juncture was direct and simple.

In February 1947, the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha appointed a Working Committee to sound out public opinion about the proposal of creating a separate Hindu province in West Bengal.[131] On 16 February 1947, the report of this Committee was examined and it was decided that an all-Bengal conference would be convened on 15–16 March 1947, where all the leading personalities of the province, Hindu representatives of all the districts and sub-divisions and special interest groups would be invited to discuss the question at length.[132] After two days of deliberation, this conference in March adopted a resolution, which said that the Partition scheme was 'the best means to prevent the destruction of the fabric of Bengal's national life'. To achieve this, the Provincial Hindu Mahasabha would launch a mass movement using peaceful means.[133] The Congress at this stage also seemed to be favourably disposed to the scheme, as its Working Committee had just adopted a resolution regarding the Partition of Punjab and the Congress President had made a statement relating that proposal to Bengal as well. In the latter half of March, the local Congress organisations, in spite of the opposition of Gandhi and Sarat Bose, became active, along with the Mahasabha workers, in drumming up support for the Partition campaign.[134] The Hindu section

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[130] This position has been spelt out very clearly in N. C. Chatterjee's presidential address at the Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference, held at Tarakeswar on 4–6 April 1947. For more details see, Leonard A. Gordon, 'Divided Bengal: Problems of Nationalism and Identity in 1947 Partition', in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (New Delhi: 1993), pp. 300–01, 305–07; and also Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, pp. 220–65.

[131] FCR for Bengal for the first half of February 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[132] *The Pioneer*, 18 February 1947.

[133] *The Pioneer*, 17 March 1947.

[134] FCR for Bengal for first and second half of March 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

of the press in Bengal also lent it its full backing.[135] But however much these other groups might contribute, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Hindu Mahasabha remained 'the chief protagonists' of this movement.[136]

The Mahasabha decided to give this campaign more public focus at its annual provincial conference to be held at Tarakeswar on 4–6 April 1947, where such Hindu stalwarts as L. V. Bhopatkar, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Master Tara Singh were scheduled to speak. Extensive preparations were made, as '[i]n this large Hindu conference', said a handbill, 'the Hindus of Bengal…[were to] decide their future.'[137] Several petitions from the Muslim inhabitants of Tarakeswar and other neighbouring police stations and the local Muslim MLA tried unsuccessfully to stop this meeting, where the local reception committee expected about 30,000 people.[138] Although actual attendance was about 5000 less, that did not undermine the political significance of this conference. Here in his presidential address, N. C. Chatterjee provided the justification for, and a blue print of, the Partition proposal. '[E]very Bengalee Hindu', he declared, 'whatever may be his political belief or party affiliation, wants to remain a citizen of the Indian Union and resents the very idea of being the subject of a theocracy, namely, a Muslim Pakistan State.' So as the Muslim League 'persist[ed] in its fantastic idea of establishing Pakistan in Bengal', the Hindus should demand a separate homeland for themselves, consisting of the Hindu majority areas, which were, 'the Presidency Division, Burdwan Division, Calcutta, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling along with portions of Malda, Dinajpur and Barisal remaining within the Indian Union.'[139] The Bengali Hindu identity, which was until recently being imagined as a numerical notion, was now also given a concrete territorial representation.

The conference formally adopted a resolution to this effect and a Council of Action was constituted, with a target of recruiting 100,000

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[135] Fortnightly Report on the Press for the second half of March 1947, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 38/47, WBSA.

[136] F. J. Burrows, Governor of Bengal, to Wavell, 19 March 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[137] 'Handbill', GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 157/47, WBSA.

[138] 'Regarding Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Conference to be held at Tarakeswar on the 4th, 5th and 6th April 1947', by District Magistrate, Hooghly; from District Magistrate, Hooghly to Commissioner, Burdwan Division, 2 April 1947, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 157/47, WBSA.

[139] N. C. Chatterjee, *Presidential Address, Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference* (New Delhi: nd), pp. 8–11.

volunteers by June 1947. It was also decided that the Working Committee of the Mahasabha would negotiate with the Congress and work out a joint programme of action to achieve this goal. Within a few days, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee formally announced its approval of the general principle of Partition and the movement was launched with great enthusiasm on all sides.[140] The Communist Party and Sarat Bose's Forward Bloc continued to oppose Partition and the Muslim League tried to laugh it off as a political stunt to kill Pakistan. "[B]ut I think', wrote the Governor of Bengal in a cautious note to Mountbatten, 'they now realise that the partitionists mean business.'[141]

But as it appears, even before the Tarakeswar conference, a movement in favour of the proposed Bengali Hindu homeland was gaining momentum in the Bengal countryside. By early March, the movement had gained 'the moral support of the great majority of the Hindu population' of western Bengal.[142] By April–May 1947 the movement had spread to all parts of Bengal, without exception. Between 29 April and 10 May 1947 (a period of 12 days), as many as 125 meetings were held under the auspices of the local Mahasabha branches, where resolutions were passed in support of Partition and then the resolutions were sent to the Viceroy for his attention.[143] The attendance at these meetings ranged from 1200 to 10,000—even 20,000 on one occasion. Although the Communists, the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) continued to oppose it, the inevitability of Partition seemed to have taken hold of the imagination of the majority of the Bengali Hindus at this stage.[144] A survey of public opinion by the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in early May 1947 showed that an overwhelming proportion of 98 per cent of the Bengali Hindus supported Partition.[145] When Sarat Bose, now an isolated figure in the Bengal Congress, and Abul Hashim of the Bengal Muslim League announced their proposal for the formation of a free united Bengal, and Suhrawardy and his followers in the Bengal Muslim League took

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[140] FCR for Bengal for the first half of April 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[141] F. J. Burrows, Governor of Bengal, to Mountbatten, 11 April 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[142] FCR for Bengal for the first half of March 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[143] Computed from the list in GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R Part II, NAI.

[144] FCR for Bengal for first and second half of April, and first and second half of May 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[145] Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937–1947* (New Delhi: 1976), p. 227.

up the campaign,[146] this alternative proposal found no takers either among the Hindus or the Muslims. The protagonists of Partition, on the other hand, redoubled their efforts to achieve their goal. On 10 May 1947at the Jatiya Banga Mahasammelan, before a gathering of 10,000 people, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee declared that if Partition could not be secured through constitutional means, the Hindus would fight for it. For this purpose every Hindu *mohalla* (locality) was to be turned into a fortress under the protection of a volunteer corps. Instructions were sent to the local Mahasabha branches to speed up their propaganda activities.[147]

The dalit population of the province could hardly insulate themselves from this popular euphoria that the Hindu Mahasabha had created. Particularly, the Namasudras of eastern Bengal and the Rajbansis in the north could hardly afford to remain aloof, as the proposed Partition plan concerned them in a very direct way. Also the propaganda activities targeted them specifically. N. C. Chatterjee did not forget to mention in his Tarakeswar address that one of the advantages of the proposed partition was that 'over 60 per cent of the members of the Scheduled Castes [of Bengal would]… be in the New Province.' This meant that their 'economic and civic rights…[would] be safeguarded.'[148] In Bakarganj district in April–May 1947, joint meetings were organised by the local Congress committees and the Hindu Mahasabha branches at places like Jhalakati and Goila, or Tarkibandar and Ramshidhi Bazar in the Gournadi police station. In these meetings resolutions were passed in favour of Partition and the inclusion of the Hindu majority areas of Bakarganj and Faridpur into the new province of the Bengali Hindus. In all these areas, one should remember, the Hindus constituted the majority because of a large concentration of Namasudras and other dalit groups among the local population.[149] In such areas, at a number of meetings organised by the local Mahasabha, for example, at Nazirpur and Pirojpur in Bakarganj district or at Rajair in Faridpur, as also at Balarambati in Hooghly in west Bengal, local dalit leaders were invited to preside or

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[146] For details of this movement, see Leonard Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Sarat & Subhas Chandra Bose* (New Delhi: 1989), pp. 580–85; Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, pp. 223–45.

[147] FCR for Bengal for the first and second half of May 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[148] N. C. Chatterjee, *Presidential Address, Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference,* (New Delhi: nd), p. 2.

[149] For more details on these meetings, see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 225–26.

propose resolutions in support of the Partition, which were then unanimously adopted and forwarded to the Viceroy.[150]

But apart from such general meetings, several dalit organisations, such as the Bangiya Yadava Mahasabha,[151] the Assam–Banga Yogi Sammilani of Nadia[152] or the Bengal Kshattra Kaibartta Mahasabha, were also at this stage actively involved in propagating the idea of Partition. However, along with this, some of them also demanded 'caste constituency' in the new constitution of India, with seats reserved for each of the Scheduled Castes in proportion to their numerical strength.[153] In Faridpur several exclusive dalit meetings were held in the Gopalganj sub-division where a large number of Namasudras participated and the speakers belonged, with just one or two exceptions, to different dalit political organisations. The meetings resolved to support Partition and demanded that the Gopalganj sub-division should be united with Khulna and attached to the new province of West Bengal. In Khulna too, exclusive dalit meetings were reported in early May from Khulna town and Bagerhat town, where identical resolutions were adopted in support of the Partition proposal.[154] Their counterparts in north Bengal also identified themselves with the same sentiments and apprehensions. At a meeting on 13 June 1947 at Haripur in Dinajpur district, 'on behalf of the Scheduled Caste people of the district', an appeal was issued to all caste and Scheduled Caste Hindu MLAs, so that they voted in favour of Partition on 20 June 1947, when the proposal would be moved in the Legislative Assembly, and, thereby, ensured that the district of Dinajpur was included in Hindu India, not Pakistan.[155] Two days later,

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[150] See, for example, from Annada Charan Roy to Viceroy, 3 May 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R Part I, NAI; Minutes of the proceedings of meeting of the Balarambati Union Hindu Mahasabha…on 4 May 1947, in *ibid.*; from Nagendranath Haldar to Viceroy, 3 May 1947, in *ibid.*, Part II; from Sudhanya Kumar Sarcar to Viceroy, 20 June 1947, in *ibid.*, Part V.

[151] Bangiya Yadava Mahasabha, Resolutions, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R Part I, NAI.

[152] Telegram from Promothonath Nath to Viceroy, 14 May 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R Part III, NAI.

[153] From Krishna Chandra Garai, President, Bengal Khshattra Kaibartta Mahasabha, to P. R. Thakur, 2 June 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R Part II, NAI.

[154] For more details on these meetings, see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 225–26.

[155] Resolutions of a united meeting of Caste & Scheduled Caste Hindus of the Unions of Haripur P.S. (Dinajpur), GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R Part V, NAI.

another meeting organised by the local Hindu Mahasabha at Saidpur town in Rangpur district, with a large representation of the dalit, also demanded the inclusion of the Hindu majority areas of Nilphamari sub-division of Rangpur to 'Hindu Bengal', rather than to Muslim Pakistan.[156]

Among the supporters of the sovereign united Bengal proposal was Jogendranath Mandal, the President of the Bengal Provincial Scheduled Caste Federation.[157] The Working Committee of the Federation on 14 May resolved that,

> 'the division of the province into Hindu and Muslim Bengal…[was] no solution of the communal problems.'

And that it would,

> check the growing political consciousness and ruthlessly crush the solidarity of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal… While the Scheduled Castes of Eastern Bengal…[would] be at the mercy of the majority community [Muslim], the Scheduled Castes of Western Bengal… [would] be subject to perpetual slavery of the caste Hindus. Hence the Scheduled Castes of this province…[could] not be a party to such a mischievous and dangerous move…[158]

In support of this position, a few meetings were organised in the interior by the local branches of the Federation, where identical resolutions condemning the proposed Partition and upholding the united Bengal proposal were passed and forwarded to the Viceroy.[159] On the basis of such displays of support, Suhrawardy and Jogendranath Mandal at this stage started claiming that the Scheduled Caste Hindus were not in favour of the partitioning of Bengal, as demanded by the Hindu Mahasabha.[160]

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[156] From Rama Bishnu Sinha, President Saidpur Hindu Mahasabha, to Viceroy, 15 June 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R Part V, NAI.

[157] For details of this movement, see, Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj*, pp. 580–85; S. Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, pp. 223–45.

[158] K. P. Mazumder, General Secretary, Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes' Federation, to Private Secretary to Viceroy, 14 May 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part III, NAI.

[159] Proceedings of these meetings may be found in GI, Reform Office, File No. 41/3/47-R Part III, NAI; also, from Bipin Chandra Haldar to the Governor-General of India, 1 June 1947, GI, Reform Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part IV, NAI.

[160] Sunil Kr Sengupta, Hony. Secretary, Council of Action for New Bengal, to Private Secretary to Viceroy, 19 May 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part III, NAI.

The reality of the situation, however, indicated a different scenario, as Mandal's anti-Partition rallies attracted little attention. A meeting organised by him in early May 1947 in the 24-Parganas was attended by not more than 50 people, while as a counterpoint to this, a meeting organised by the Congress-supported Bengal Provincial Depressed Classes League on 27 May 1947 was attended by about 2500 people, 'including a thousand members of the Depressed Classes'. The meeting was presided over by Radhanath Das, a Congress dalit leader, and addressed by Rajendra Prasad, with Jagjivan Ram as the chief guest.[161] The resolutions adopted at this conference demanded the creation of a separate province of West Bengal within the Indian Union and condemned the 'Sovereign Bengal State' scheme as 'dangerous for all nationalist Bengalees.'[162] Around the same time, at a meeting in Jalpaiguri, attended by 500 delegates from all the districts of Rajshahi division, the dalit Rajbansi leader Upendranath Barman described the united independent Bengal scheme as 'a great political trap' for the Hindus.[163]

All these meetings and resolutions of the dalit of Bengal reflected a new mentality of accepting a greater Hindu identity and its territorial representation. At the institutional level too, most of the Scheduled Caste MLAs had already accepted the Congress–Mahasabha position, as it was the only way they could hope to secure for themselves any access to power in a post-colonial polity. This became clear when the Partition issue was put to vote in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on 20 June 1947. Rup Narayan Roy, the Rajbansi Communist MLA from Dinajpur did not vote, like Jyoti Basu of his party. Four other Scheduled Caste members from east Bengal also voted with the Muslims—two of them having recently crossed the floor. But the rest of the Scheduled Caste MLAs (25 out of 30) voted for the Congress–Mahasabha scheme of Partition and for keeping West Bengal as a Hindu majority province within the larger political Union of India.[164]

Once Partition was secured, political attention shifted to two other urgent issues. The first of these was the immediate dissolution of the League ministry. On the very next day, 21 June 1947, the Mahasabha organised a large number of meetings, including one in Calcutta at

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[161] FCR for Bengal for the second half of May 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.
[162] From Radhanath Das to the Governor General of India, 30 May 1947, File No. 41/3/47-R Part V, NAI.
[163] Quoted in R. Das Gupta, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869–1947*, p. 237.
[164] Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj*, p. 586.

the University Institute Hall, presided over by Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee himself.[165] The meeting resolved that the present Muslim League ministry had 'no moral or constitutional rights to continue in office' and that two regional ministries should immediately be formed for the two provinces, in order to stop, among other things, 'any unfair distribution of assets and other division of liability' between the two provinces.[166] Under the circumstances, on 28 June 1947, Dr P. C. Ghosh, the leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party in West Bengal, was invited by the Governor to form a cabinet, 'without portfolios and without direct administrative powers.' The ministers would have the right to see all papers and comment on and, if they so desired, object to any proposal that affected the non-Muslim majority areas of the province.[167] This measure did not of course satisfy the Hindu demand for regional ministries and was therefore criticised in the Hindu press as 'glaringly discriminatory' or as 'a clever manoeuvre to retain a discredited League Ministry'.[168] But since the government did not concede any immediate change in the arrangement, on 2 July 1947, Ghosh finally announced his 11-member shadow cabinet, which included two well known Congress dalit leaders, Hem Chandra Naskar (in charge of Agriculture, Forest and Fisheries) and Radhanath Das (Civil Supplies).[169]

The other more important issue was related to the work of the Boundary Commission. Here the main concern was to retain the Scheduled Caste dominated areas of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Jessore within Hindu West Bengal. In support of this demand a number of meetings were held in Calcutta, which discussed Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's proposal to form a joint committee for collecting data for the Boundary Commission. At one such meeting of the residents of the districts of Faridpur and Bakarganj living in Calcutta, resolutions were passed for the inclusion of the Hindu majority areas of western Barisal and Faridpur in West Bengal. Protests were also made against the so-called appeasement policy of the Congress. It was suggested

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[165] FCR for Bengal for the second half of June 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.
[166] Telegram from General Secretary, Provincial Hindu Mahasabha to Viceroy, 22 June 1947, IOR: R/3/1/159.
[167] Draft Announcement, added to John D. Tyson to George Abell, 28 June 1947, IOR: R/3/1/159.
[168] Fortnightly Report on the Press for the first half of July 1947, GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 38/47, WBSA.
[169] Telegram from Governor of Bengal to Viceroy, 2 July 1947; 'Statement Showing Allocation of Portfolios to Existing Ministers', IOR: R/3/1/159.

that 'if the home-land of the Namasudras was sacrificed for the appeasement of the Muslims, they would rise and resist to a man.'[170]

Outside Calcutta, in the entire Dacca Division, great activity was reported in late June and early July, for presenting 'the case of the Scheduled Caste areas in Faridpur and Bakarganj.' A meeting organised by the Gopalganj Nationalist Association expressed the unwillingness of the Hindu areas of Faridpur, Bakarganj and Jessore to remain under the Pakistan government. Particularly in Faridpur, both the Congress and the Mahasabha now made a determined effort to win over the Scheduled Caste Federation in support of this boundary claim. In Gopalganj sub-division, such efforts to secure the support of the dalit led to so much tension that the district authorities had to prohibit all meetings under section 144.[171] In Bakarganj district, on 19 June 1947 the dalit population of Bagdha Union in Gaurnadi police station had already formed a Bagdha Union Scheduled Caste Hindusthan Bengal Boundary Committee, which demanded the Hindu majority areas of Gaurnadi police station be included 'with Hindusthan Bengal'.[172] A similar demand on behalf of the 'Scheduled Caste people of Gaurnadi Thana' was also raised by the Sarikol Scheduled Caste Union of Adhuna, on the grounds that this region was 'socially connected' to the Hindu majority areas of Gopalganj sub-division.[173] Another 'crowded meeting of Scheduled Castes of Swarupkati', also in Bakarganj district, demanded a few days later the inclusion of a large area comprising Nazirpur, Swarupkati, Nalchiti, Jhalakati, Banoripara police stations and parts of Pirojpur and Kowkhali, because they were Hindu majority areas and contiguous to the Khulna district.[174]

Indeed, in Bakarganj these boundary claims had become the issue of a concerted campaign, as is evident from another series of meetings held around this time. On 21 June 1947 a meeting at Sreeramkati High School compound in Nazirpur police station of Bakarganj district was 'attended by thousands of people specially of Scheduled Caste communities'. The meeting resolved that the north-western

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[170] FCR for Bengal for the second half of June and first half of July 1947, IOR: L/P & J/5/154.

[171] *Ibid.*.

[172] From Bepin Chandra Baroi to Viceroy, 1 July 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part V, NAI.

[173] From V. Natta to Viceroy, 30 June 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part V, NAI.

[174] Telegram from Upen Haoladar to Viceroy, 5 July 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part V, NAI.

portions of Bakarganj district, along with the contiguous areas of Gopalganj sub-division, Rajair and Kalkini Police Stations of Faridpur, 'being predominantly Hindu Areas wherein the Scheduled castes are majority,… should be included in the West Bengal Province for the cultural, religious and economic advancement of the Scheduled Castes who in no case would submit to the rule of the Muslims.' The meeting further resolved that 'the Scheduled Caste Hindus of the area have no confidence in the leadership of Mr Jogendranath Mandal…because of his surrender to the Muslim League'. Another meeting on 22 June 1947 at Jalabari School compound in Swarupkati police station of Bakarganj resolved that along with the above mentioned regions, 'the Northern portions of Pirojpur subdivision … being predominantly Hindu Majority areas' should also be included in the province of West Bengal. The other resolution passed in the meeting registered a lack of confidence of the Scheduled Castes of the area in the leadership of Jogendranath Mandal. On the same day another 'Public Meeting of the People of Pirojpur P. S. North', held at Rayerkati School compound, unanimously adopted the same resolutions.[175] All these three meetings, like the other pro-Partition meetings mentioned earlier, were presided over by local dalit leaders, who were never prominent in institutional politics. This certainly suggests some amount of initiative at the grassroots level. But on the other hand, the exactly identical wording of the resolutions adopted in three different meetings held simultaneously at three different places also indicates some amount of organisation and planning to mobilise public opinion among the local dalit population.

As against this Hindu mobilisation, evidence of counter mobilisation is also there. A meeting attended by 'about 5 thousand' Muslims and Scheduled Castes at Badurtala Free Primary School in Khanjapur Union in Bakarganj on 6 July 1947 protested against such an 'unjustified and extremely unreasonable attempt', engineered by the caste Hindus, for the inclusion of large parts of their district within West Bengal.[176] But in this entire region such dalit-Muslim co-operation was a rarity rather than a general rule. And this was true outside east Bengal as well. A 'meeting of the Scheduled Caste Rajbansis of Dinajpur', held at Thakurgaon on 22 June 1947, demanded that 'the Districts of Dinajpur, Malda and such portions of Rangpur which are

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[175] Proceedings of the meetings may be found in GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part V, NAI.

[176] Proceedings of the meeting may be found in *ibid*..

predominantly inhabited by the Rajbansis…be included in the new Province of West Bengal'. The meeting was presided over by a not so very well known Rajbansi leader, indicating local initiative to remain in the Hindu province to preserve what they described as 'the linguistic, social and cultural unity of the Rajbansi community as a whole'.[177] In the 24-Parganas area, 'a mass meeting of Caste Hindus and Scheduled classes' of Chandpur Union protested against the Muslim League's proposal to include Barasat sub-division within Pakistan.[178]

However, as the 'Report of the Bengal Boundary Commission' later revealed, many of these territorial claims and counter-claims were not even considered by the Commission.[179] So the Partition, which ultimately came into force on the midnight of 14/15 August 1947, did not help the dalit masses, as many prominent groups like the Namasudras and the Rajbansis lost their territorial anchorage. Contrary to their hopes and in spite of their pleas, most of the Namasudra inhabited areas in Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, like the Rajbansi areas of Dinajpur and Rangpur, went to East Pakistan, instead of West Bengal. And the post-Partition violence, as F. C. Bourne, the last British Governor of East Bengal reported in 1950, left many of them with 'nothing beyond their lives and the clothes they stand up in'.[180] This compelled thousands of them to migrate as refugees to India, where they had to once again begin their struggle for existence. Being uprooted from their traditional homeland, they were aliens in their new one too. In the early fifties, in the border districts of West Bengal we find the Namasudra refugees involved in violent strife with the locally entrenched groups like the Goalas and Muslims, and desperately trying to acquire a foothold for themselves in the area.[181] What the Partition movement indicated

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[177] 'Resolutions passed at Thakurgaon Sessions of Dinajpur District Schedule [sic] Caste (Rajbansi) conference on 22-6-47', GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part V, NAI.

[178] From Sashibhusan Naskar to Viceroy, 5 July 1947, GI, Reforms Office, File No. 41/3/47-R, Part V, NAI.

[179] See, 'Report of the Bengal Boundary Commission', GI, Reforms Office, File No. 68/47-R, NAI.

[180] Note by Governor of East Bengal to Nurul Amin, Prime Minister of East Bengal, 24 February 1950, Bourne Papers, MSS. Eur. E. 364, India Office Library, London.

[181] Shantipur Police Station, Village Tewarimath and Char Nrisinghapur, Village Crime Note Book No. 22/9/53; I am indebted to Prof. Basudeb Chattopadhyay for this reference.

and the post-Partition realities confirmed, was their inability to influence the broader political processes, despite their willingness to submit to the dominant representations of power. Yet this inability to be in charge of the realities of power did not destroy their dream of empowerment. Those who were left behind in their original homeland in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were under a greater compulsion to live with their Hindu minority identity; but they retained a deeper emotional attachment to their imagined, but now distant, homeland in the west.[182] The present day 'Namasudra owner-cultivators' in Bangladesh, writes a recent commentator, always entertain 'a deep-rooted hope to settle on the other side of the border at the first opportunity'.[183]

During these trying days, the Hindu Mahasabha did not of course desert them altogether. Frequently in meetings leaders like N. C. Chatterjee would mention that the 'position of the Scheduled Castes, specially in Faridpur district, viz., Gopalganj and the contiguous areas, has become difficult.'[184] And as transborder migration continued, Chatterjee ultimately raised the issue on the floor of the Lok Sabha on 31 March 1955. 'You know in the districts of Khulna, Barisal and Jessore in one compact block', he reminded Prime Minister Nehru, 'there are 14 lakhs of Namasudras. They have started to move. It is a terrific thing.... That is something, which must be stopped in India's interests.' And it could be stopped, he thought, by 'demand[ing] immediately the accession of the district of Khulna' to India, as it was evidently a 'Namasudra area', fraudulently shown in the last census as a Muslim majority district![185] Lost territories, in other words, needed to be reclaimed in order to reconcile the numerical and spatial notions of community identity that were so meticulously constructed by the Mahasabha during the last few years of colonial rule. However, this public expression of sympathy did not mean that Hindu Mahasabha had in its agenda any other programme for the integration of the dalit. Throughout this period, and more

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[182] An excellent study on contemporary dalit mentalities in Bangladesh is, Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict* (New Delhi: 1994).

[183] Masayuki Usuda, 'Pushed towards the Partition: Jogendranath Mandal and the Constrained Namasudra Movement', in H. Kotani (ed.), *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed* (New Delhi: 1997), p. 266.

[184] The Hooghly Sadar Subdivisional Conference, 11 January 1948, Presidential Address by Sj. N. C. Chatterjee, p. 5.

[185] 'East Bengal And Kashmir Problems', speech by Shri N. C. Chatterjee, M.P., to the Lok Sabha on Foreign Affairs Debate on 31 March 1955, pp. 18–19.

particularly from the mid-sixties, anti-reservationism became a major plank in its political campaigns.[186]

V

The discussion above perhaps has made it clear by now that the Partition movement in Bengal in 1947 was by no means just a *bhadralok* affair, although the initiative evidently came from them. When the creation of Pakistan became a certainty and it threatened to incorporate the whole of Bengal, the provincial Mahasabha and Congress leaders became desperate to prevent their separation from mainland Hindu India and being subordinated to a dominant Muslim majority rule. Thanks to the mass mobilisation drive of the Hindu Mahasabha since the early 1940s, there was now a groundswell of opinion in favour of retaining the Hindu majority areas of West Bengal as a Hindu homeland, tied to Hindu India, rather than becoming part of Muslim Pakistan. The shared religious identity of the Bengali Hindus had by now transcended the cultural–linguistic boundaries and evolved a broader spatial connotation. That imagined communal space was not any more confined to Bengal alone, but was connected to the entire Indian subcontinent. It was only by identifying with that expanded space that they could ensure for themselves a guaranteed access to the rank of a hegemonic majority, instead of being reduced to the pitiable status of a subjugated minority. Ideologically, the Partition issue had polarised Bengali society along religious lines in 1947. Those among the Hindus who disagreed with this ostentatious representation of Hindu nationalism, and Hindu anxieties, were exceptions. The cultural–linguistic identity, or Bengali chauvinism of the 1920s and 1930s, which a number of historians have talked about,[187] was now evidently subordinated to an allegiance to the wider notion of a territorial state of India. The dream of a united sovereign Bengal, in this politico-cultural environment, was at once incompatible and suspect.[188]

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[186] See for example, Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, 49 Session, Presidential Address by Nitya Narayan Banerjee, held on the 24th, 25th & 26th April 1965 at Patna, Bihar, p. 24; *Election Manifesto of Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha* (New Delhi: 1966), p. 15.

[187] Such as Leonard Gordon, Gitasree Bandyopadhyay, Pranab Chatterjee, Bidyut Chakrabarty, etc.

[188] Indeed, many Bengali Hindus believed that the United Bengal proposal was a ploy to keep West Bengal, and more particularly Calcutta, within East Pakistan. See,

For the dalit masses of east Bengal and their local leaders, participation in the Partition campaign was a considered response to a changing configuration of power. The transfer of power process by recognising only the two dominant religious identities, had contributed to the marginalisation of other identities, at both elite and mass levels, the dalit minority identity being foremost among them. The spectre of Partition in this context had made it clear to the dalit of Bengal and their elected representatives that it was only by aligning with the majority Hindus in a future India that they could hope to secure any access to power. Representation and articulation of their Hindu identity and participation in the Partition campaign were, therefore, their informed strategy to carve out for themselves a niche in a post-colonial polity.

The intention of this chapter is not to tell the story of Partition, but to re-examine the equally important question of the alienation of the dalit and the nature of their political identity, which scholars from Gail Omvedt[189] to Kancha Ilaih[190] have drawn our attention to. This particular story is a reminder that often in our eagerness to emphasise, or even essentialise, the disjunction between dalit and Hindu identities, we ignore incidents and possibilities of boundary-crossing. The idea of a birth-community associated with a demarcated space dominated the discursive field of Hindu nationalism for a long time and the dalit were located within and not outside that discursive space. The latter's positive response to this ideological campaign showed that when broader political forces and institutional changes reduced all complex relationships into a simple binary opposition between the Hindus and the Muslims, the putative 'Otherness' of the dalit tended to recede before the more prominently projected 'Otherness' of the Muslims.

It is within a specific political context that an identity is constructed and articulated and therefore a significant contextual shift may also lead to a transfiguration of that identity. Partition was definitely a cataclysmic event that represented such a shift. In the wake of Partition and the communal carnage that followed, the

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Bidyut Chakrabarty, 'The 1947 United Bengal Movement: A Thesis Without Synthesis', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1993, pp. 467–88.

[189] Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: 1994).

[190] K. Ilaih, 'Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative'.

appeal which Dr Ambedkar himself had issued to his fellow dalit may be quoted in this context:

> I would like to tell the Scheduled Castes who happen today to be impounded inside Pakistan to come over to India by such means as may be available to them. The second thing I want to say is that it would be fatal for the Scheduled Castes, whether in Pakistan or in Hyderabad, to put their faith in Muslims or the Muslim League. It has become a habit with the Scheduled Castes to look upon the Muslims as their friends simply because they dislike the Hindus. This is a mistaken view.[191]

Placed within the context of 1947, this statement amounted to a major shift in the position of a leader who was once a great supporter of the Pakistan demand of the Muslim League. The evidence presented in this chapter shows that this shift had already occurred among his dalit brethren in Bengal, who had identified themselves with the Hindus and were prepared to co-operate with their co-religionists across class and caste lines, against what at that moment appeared to be their projected 'Other', the Muslims. This meant their crossing the boundary, at least for the moment, and leaping into the domain of the Indian, predominantly Hindu, nation, as represented by the Congress–Mahasabha combine in those critical last days of colonial rule in India.

This story of the redefinition of communal boundaries in 1947 should not, however, be misunderstood as a simplistic narrative of integration of Hindu society. This incorporation of the dalit neither altered nor threatened the basic power structure of the Bengali Hindu society, which ensured the dominance of the upper castes. It did not mean that all conflicts and tensions in that society were resolved. This saga of appropriation of dalit politics by mainstream nationalism in the penultimate phase of our colonial history only reinforces the argument that we put forth in the first chapter of this book. The dalit were being co-opted into and subordinated by this power structure, which thus maintained its ideological hegemony. The Hindu nationalist discourse was inclusive, but not integrative. One may recall here Savarkar's 1939 Khulna statement with reference to the dalit: 'It is also their country as it is ours. But it is not the country of the

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[191] Quoted in Dhananjay Keer, *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay: 1981), p. 399.

Muslims.'[192] He makes here a deliberate distinction between 'they' and 'we'; but the two groups are united by a common territory—the 'country'—in opposition to the outsiders, the Muslims. Apart from political rhetoric, the Hindu Mahasabha during this whole period never proposed any realistic programme for the eradication of untouchability, let alone for the rooting out of the caste system. And later, in the name of defending bureaucratic efficiency, it became the most vociferous critic of affirmative action policies. Yet, the dalit responded to its political campaigns. This was a conscious strategic decision on their part, not an abject surrender. They were sufficiently selective in their response: the census campaign was ignored, while the Partition demand evoked huge mass support. Because, in the last days of colonial rule, their inability to influence the changing configuration of power dictated such a course of action as best suited to confront it, as well as to defend their own interests.

This Hinduisation again was not the only representation of the dalit collective mind. I have shown in an earlier book[193] that almost simultaneously the same dalit peasants were responding to the Kisan Sabha campaigns and then participated in the Tebhaga movement, alongside their Muslim peasant neighbours, around a more class-based demand for a two-thirds share of the produce. The majority of the participants in this share-croppers' struggle in north and east Bengal belonged to dalit groups like the Rajbansis and the Namsasudras and this indicated their class consciousness and their willingness to collaborate with other peasants *qua* peasants across religious and caste boundaries. This raises serious questions about the claim of perpetual disjunction of dalit identity throughout the course of Indian history and in the present day.

Emphasising the constructed nature of all collective social identities it may be argued that dalit self-perception as well as the modes of its political articulation were neither wholly autonomous, nor absolutely static. Representations of their collective self reflected their appreciation of an ever-changing political reality and strategies to negotiate it. We may here get back to the issue, which we raised at the very beginning of this chapter and also in the first chapter of the dalit—Hindutva alliance. It is this strategic consideration that has prompted the dalit political groups in recent years to negotiate power

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[192] *Sabhapati Veer Sabharkarer Bhashan, Bangiya Pradeshik Hindu Sammelan, Khulna, 17–18 February 1939*, Asutosh Lahiry Papers, NMML.

[193] See S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 229–37.

sharing arrangements with the BJP, as it remains, in the absence of any systemic change, the only way for them to gain access to power. An alliance between the dalit and the Hindutva politics is not unprecedented in history. The latter has always allowed this leeway in order to appropriate potential dalit dissent and maintain the 'dominance of the upper castes and classes'—to use Ghanshyam Shah's expression—over the reins of power.

Conclusion

In colonial Bengal, as this study has shown, Hindu society successfully maintained its structural integrity, ideological discipline and political solidarity by overcoming, co-opting and suppressing challenges to its basic power relations. The most powerful status group in Bengal, the *bhadralok*, initially comprised mainly the three traditional higher castes—the Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya—who had control over landholding, education and the professions. This group gradually incorporated the upwardly mobile members of some of the trading and middle peasant castes and even some dalits. Status in this society thus closely corresponded to ritual rank as well as the location of economic and political power; and where there was incongruity, that is, when caste status did not correspond to economic or political power, it was resolved through the co-option of the upwardly mobile groups into the ritual order. The latter continued to prefer, despite their education and modernity, some of the traditional caste markers to express their status and identity, because social status throughout India was still understood, created and altered through ritual symbols concerning food exchange, marriage, life cycle rituals and other religious rites that sanctified the position of the upper castes. And this symbolic cultural world of Hindu India survived the onslaught of a rationalist colonial modernity. The socially mobile groups, therefore, instead of trying to wreck this status system, sought accommodation within it. And Hindu society by making such piecemeal adjustments prevented a catastrophic structural collapse.

In relation to the lower orders, the domination of the upper castes was exerted through both coercion and consent, the two reciprocally balancing each other. It is easier to understand coercive power, which was used in abundance from time to time to exact obedience. The consent, on the other hand, was generated through what Antonio Gramsci would call 'intellectual and moral leadership' through which a 'social group dominates antagonistic groups'. Gramsci also argued

that the effectiveness of this 'ethico-political' hegemony lies in 'its foundation in the decisive function that the leading group exercises in the decisive nucleus of economic activity'.[1] Herein lies some difficulty in applying Gramscian theory to our colonial situation where the upper castes could hardly claim any 'decisive' control over economic activities. But there is space for adapting it to our situation, as Gramsci himself left this concept rather fluid and flexible, as the form of hegemony, he believed, would often depend on the particular historical configuration.[2] Brahmanical power in colonial India, as Jyotib Phule in Maharashtra had diagnosed, had two aspects, religious as well as temporal.[3] And where the Brahmans themselves lacked in temporal power, they were patronised by those who had control over it. In a colonial context, this temporal power did not mean 'decisive' economic power, but a portfolio of various residual secular rights to control society. And the colonial state left a significant autonomous space for this social authority to function unhindered. In other words, the castes, who combined in themselves land rights, political leadership and religious textual knowledge—metaphorically referred to in this study as the Raja–pundit nexus—actually dominated Hindu society and its ethico-cultural world that legitimated the caste system.

The continuing legitimacy of caste in India we may therefore explain in the same way as the theory of hegemony has been deployed in European historiography to understand the 'reform of popular culture'.[4] In Hindu society popular culture seemed to have been 'reformed' by the elite groups in such a way that it began to embody and thus legitimise the ideologies of hierarchy and domination.

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[1] Quoted in Paul Ginsborg, 'Gramsci and the Era of Bourgeois Revolution in Italy', in John A. Davis (ed.), *Gramsci and Italy's Passive Revolution* (London, New York: 1979), pp. 50, 56.

[2] For a discussion on this see, Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: 2002), pp. 101–05.

[3] Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jatirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Cambridge: 1985), p. 211.

[4] For this concept of the 'reform of popular culture' see Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: 1978), p. 207 and passim; Martin Ingram, 'The Reform of Popular Culture? Sex and Marriage in Early Modern England', in Barry Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth Century England* (London: 1988), pp. 129–30.

Hegemony, as Raymond Williams has argued, is not a matter of opinion or ideological manipulation, but 'something which is truly total', which 'constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway'.[5] In India the cultural hegemony of the Vedic Brahmanical religion set the limits for the imagination of the lower castes, making their social disabilities appear to be unalterable realities or as parts of their routine daily existence. Caste as a prescriptive normative system thus became an Indian (not just Hindu) common sense and therefore, transgressing its boundaries was rarely an available option.

This is not to repeat the Dumontian position about the absolute dominance of dharma or to argue that there was no protest against the inequities of the caste system. To quote Raymond Williams again: 'hegemony is not singular; indeed that its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token, that they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified.'[6] We have seen that in colonial Bengal there was continual contestation of the ideology of hierarchy and resistance to the domination of the upper castes; but such protests were usually defined through a selective and creative appropriation of the existing cultural idioms, and hence these movements could be co-opted into this hegemonic order in the course of time or marginalised into secret exotic existence as residual culture. This phenomenon often led to the fracturing of caste solidarities, with the upwardly mobile sections among the lower castes being gradually incorporated into the dominant power structure and its ethico-cultural world. The masses, on the other hand, while outwardly conformed to the rules and disabilities of caste, nurtured in secret a desire to be liberated from its humiliating shackles. However, as a result of such continual contestation—much of it of course being covert—the caste system itself lost some of its rigours and stringency, as for example, untouchability per se became less of a social problem in twentieth century Bengal than it was in the sixteenth, when Sri Chaitanya had started his bhakti movement. The established religious order left autonomous enclaves where the subordinate groups imaginatively

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[5] Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', in C. Mukerji and M. Schudson (eds), *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: 1991), p. 412.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 413.

defied the rules of caste and commensality. But this limited controlled freedom could not subvert or replace the universalist ethos of caste. Popular culture, in other words, is not a space where elite values and cultural symbols are either imposed or contested. The people tend to consent only to 'a *negotiated version* of ruling-class culture and ideology.'[7] It is this dynamism or adaptability of caste, which have ensured the survival of this oppressive social structure and its hierarchical ideology and values.

These cultural adjustments were reflected in political alignments as well. In Bengal politics, the up and pushing 'Sanskritising' non-Brahman middle peasant castes had already by the 1920s and '30s identified themselves with the ethos of the Hindu caste system and the dominant ideology of nationalism. Some prominent dalit leaders, who had once contested the hegemony of the high caste Hindu leadership of Bengali nationalism, eventually became ministers in the late colonial and post-independence Congress governments, thus accepting and endorsing the dominant political ideology of the post-colonial nation-state. This provided some avenues for the dalit to gain access to political power, although such vertical movements were never significant enough to break the extant power relations in Bengali Hindu society. This tokenism nonetheless ensured an acceptance by the dalit of the dominant ideology of nationalism, which in the late colonial period had acquired an overt Hindu religious overtone. The pre-Partition communal convulsion, not surprisingly, drew significant dalit participation. And the post-Partition dalit refugees who settled in West Bengal, as well as their counterparts who stayed back in East Pakistan, were emotionally even more strongly attached to their Hindu identity than ever before.[8] Political aspirations or the self-consciousness of the lower castes need not necessarily be disruptive of Hindu unity, or any threat to Hindu political hegemony. The politics of Hindutva has shown in the past its capacity to absorb and appropriate the challenge of lower caste political self-assertion. This ability of Indian nationalism—in both its secular and religious manifestations—to suppress, appropriate and neutralise dissidence or the disruptive voices from the margins of the nation-space, has made it even more difficult for the dalit to get access to political power

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[7] Tony Bennet, 'Popular Culture and the "turn to Gramsci"', in J. Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Athens: 1998), p. 221, emphasis added.

[8] See Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with Cows* (New Delhi: 1996).

independent of the established political groups, without attempting any fundamental systemic change in the body politic.

On the other hand, it was mainly this lower caste peasant base from which the leftist movements—first the Krishak Praja Party and later the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha and the Communist movement—drew their sustenance since the late 1930s. This obviously provided an alternative avenue for the dalit to enter into a power sharing arrangement with these organisations. But the top leadership in leftist politics always remained firmly in the hands of the upper castes. Of the two Communist Parties in West Bengal in 1969, 24 of the 33 members of the State Committee of the CPI(M) belonged to the three traditional upper castes—Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya—whereas in the CPI, eight of the nine members of its State Secretariat were of high caste origin.[9] A standard argument of the post-colonial leftist governments in West Bengal since the late 1970s, was that the land reforms and the widening of the Panchayati Raj provided opportunities for the dalit and backward groups to gain access to power. This development in itself could potentially wreck the power structure of Bengali Hindu society and its ethico-ideological world. Yet, as some recent case studies show,[10] the major beneficiaries of this widening of the leftist power base at the grassroots level were the middle peasant castes, who continue to endorse the symbolic ritual superiority of the Brahmans and remain the most ardent champions of caste privileges and Hindu cultural markers of status, such as restrictions regarding endogamy and commensality. On the other hand, some of the dalit agricultural labourers have also made their way into the Gram Panchayats, but they still remain excluded from leadership roles and decision-making bodies.[11] This limited empowerment has nevertheless resulted in an ideologically driven expulsion of 'caste' from the public discourses on social justice in present day West Bengal.

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[9] Marcus F. Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: 1971), p. 14.

[10] See Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Politics in West Bengal', in his *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi: 1997); Srijnan Halder, 'Caste-Class Situation in Rural Bengal', in K. L. Sharma (ed.), *Caste and Class in India* (Jaipur, New Delhi: 1994).

[11] Sukanta Bhattacharya, 'Caste, Class and Politics in West Bengal: Case Study of a Village in Burdwan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 January 2003.

Yet, the caste question has been far from satisfactorily resolved in post-colonial West Bengal, although many of us would like to believe that it has. Back in 1952, during the first election in independent India, Manikuntala Sen had a first hand experience of this continuing hegemony of caste. In her memoir she writes about her house-to-house election campaign in the Assembly constituency of Kalighat in south Calcutta, where she eventually won as a Communist candidate.

> One day I went to the house of a highly educated bhadralok. The conditions of the household told me that we would not get any vote here. So I tried to finish my words as hurriedly as possible. But suddenly the gentleman told me, 'you need not say anything. You are a Baidya and [from] Barisal. You will get my vote.' I was surprised. Does politics become so meaningless before considerations of caste even among the educated?
>
> We saw this even more in the villages. There was no need for any election campaign. If you could nominate a Mahishya candidate in a Mahishya constituency, the work was almost done. However progressive we might be, we too had to concede defeat to caste. While choosing our candidates, we could not completely ignore it.[12]

This is a confession of a Communist leader Manikuntala Sen who was surprised to find how 'politics' had been subordinated by 'caste' not just among the Mahishya peasantry of Midnapur, but also among the highly educated intelligentsia in the elite neighbourhoods of urban south Calcutta. And even the Communist Party could not overlook the caste factor while nominating its election candidates! The situation since 1952 has changed, but not fundamentally, despite our modernist expectations to the contrary. Asok Mitra in an article in *The Telegraph* in 1986 expressed his frustration in the following words:

> Being an upper caste Hindu, and a self-regarding Bengali at that, I had begun life with the fond notion that, at least in Bengal, caste conflicts yield to class conflicts when it comes to the crunch. But one soon realised one's mistake and was convinced that West Bengal was *essentially* no different from the rest of India.[13]

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[12] Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner Katha* (Calcutta: 1982), p. 225. Translation mine.
[13] Quoted in Ranabir Samaddar, 'Caste and Power in West Bengal', in K. L. Sharma (ed.), *Caste and Class in India* (Jaipur, New Delhi: 1994), pp. 57–58, emphasis added.

Mitra thus makes a difference between *form* and *essence*, arguing that although outward forms of social conflict may differ from the rest of India, Bengali Hindu society has still maintained the essentials of caste discrimination. Even sometimes, one may point out, the forms of discrimination are not different either, as physical segregation of the dalit in schools and villages and their exclusion from temples are not altogether rare in West Bengal even as late as the beginning of the twenty-first century.[14] But these are not regular occurrences or a general feature of social life in a state where the more virulent forms of untouchability have been historically absent and where violent clashes between the landed upper castes and the landless dalit are not reported on a daily basis. Yet, the Bengal social situation presents interesting signs of ambivalence that cannot always be put into a simple cognitive order.

On 31 May 1948, *The Statesman* published two letters to the editor, written by two Bengali Brahmans, both expressing concern over the present state of the caste system. In the first letter, Basanta Kumar Chatterjee, the General Secretary of the All-India Varnashram Swarajya Sangha, talked about the 'numerous blessings' of the caste system, which, he argued, should be preserved, as it was 'inseparable from Hinduism; to destroy the one is to destroy the other.' In the second letter, however, Indranil Banerjee felt that 'denunciation of the caste system was like firing shots at an enemy already killed', because 'its evils are already past', as the 'State and society have done what is practicable for the low castes', giving them equality before law and access to wealth and power—at least no one could be denied this access on account of caste. In the following days more letters appeared in this newspaper expressing one or the other of these two competing attitudes to caste system—a traditionalist conviction to defend caste as an integral part of Hinduism, and a modernist self-confidence which believed that caste had already been reformed, modernised and displaced by class—it now existed in name only.[15] Fifty years on, these two attitudes do not contradict but complement each other and dominate public discourses on caste in West Bengal. While class has taken over the political debates in the public arena, the concept of status based on caste and endogamy still pervade the mental world of the Bengali Hindus. While the more naked forms

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[14] Anjan Ghosh, 'Cast(e) out in West Bengal', *Seminar*, 508, December 2001, pp. 47–48.

[15] *The Statesman*, 31 May 1948, 1 June 1948 and 13 June 1948.

of untouchability are atypical features of the Bengali social scene, economic, social and political power still remain in the hands of the upper and middle ranking castes, whose modernity—even professed allegiance to Marxism—does not stand in the way of their unshaken faith in ritualistic Hinduism. In such a social milieu, a Brahman still enjoys the symbolic ritual privileges and therefore *upanayana* (ritual rebirth for a Brahman boy) is still an important life cycle ritual in a modern educated Brahman family. Even after a life filled with transgressions of the behavioural codes of Brahmanism, a Brahman—like the present author—by virtue of his birth would still be invited to *Brahman-bhojan* or the ceremonial feast for the Brahmans in a Hindu life cycle ritual. And here a politically conscious *bhadralok* may still succumb to a moment of weakness and lose his mask of political correctness to make a disparaging remark about a 'Charal' (Chandal) taking advantage of the reservation system to reach the top of the office hierarchy or to get admission to an engineering college. A Dom would still be denied access to upper caste houses and temples on grounds of cleanliness and hygiene. In the villages the politically and economically entrenched middle peasant castes would still be pre-occupied in mentally translating their secular status into a language of ritual hierarchy through observance of Vedic rituals, the rules of endogamy and deference to the Brahman priest. In other words, the ideology of hierarchy and its association with the relations of power, which constitute the essence of the caste system, are yet to lose their relevance in a hybrid modern Bengali Hindu culture and society. As our present study has tried to show, by making some adjustments in form, the caste system in Bengal has managed to sustain its essence and in that sense Bengal is no exception to the general pan-Indian pattern.

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